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ALL CATS ARE GRAY

An odd story, made up of oddly assorted elements that include a man, a woman, a black cat, a treasure—and an invisible being that had to be seen to be believed.

Under normal conditions a whole person has a decided advantage over a handicapped one. But out in deep space the normal may be reversed—for humans at any rate.

Steena of the spaceways—that sounds just like a corny title for one of the Stellar-Vedo spreads. I ought to know, I've tried my hand at writing enough of them. Only this Steena was no glamour babe. She was as colorless as a Lunar plant—even the hair netted down to her skull had a sort of grayish cast and I never saw her but once draped in anything but a shapeless and baggy gray space-all.

Steena was strictly background stuff and that is where she mostly spent her free hours—in the smelly smoky background corners of any stellar-port dive frequented by free spacers. If you really looked for her you could spot her—just sitting there listening to the talk—listening and remembering. She didn't open her own mouth often. But when she did spacers had learned to listen. And the lucky few who heard her rare spoken words—these will never forget Steena.

She drifted from port to port. Being an expert operator on the big calculators she found jobs wherever she cared to stay for a time. And she came to be something like the master-minded machines she tended—smooth, gray, without much personality of her own.

But it was Steena who told Bub Nelson about the Jovan moon-rites—and her warning saved Bub's life six months later. It was Steena who identified the piece of stone Keene Clark was passing around a table one night, rightly calling it unworked Slitite. That started a rush which made ten fortunes overnight for men who were down to their last jets. And, last of all, she cracked the case of the *Empress of Mars*.

All the boys who had profited by her queer store of knowledge and her photographic memory tried at one time or another to balance the scales. But she

wouldn't take so much as a cup of Canal water at their expense, let alone the credits they tried to push on her. Bub Nelson was the only one who got around her refusal. It was he who brought her Bat.

About a year after the Jovan affair he walked into the Free Fall one night and dumped Bat down on her table. Bat looked at Steena and growled. She looked calmly back at him and nodded once. From then on they traveled together—the thin gray woman and the big gray tom-cat. Bat learned to know the inside of more stellar bars than even most spacers visit in their lifetimes. He developed a liking for Vernal juice, drank it neat and quick, right out of a glass. And he was always at home on any table where Steena elected to drop him.

This is really the story of Steena, Bat, Cliff Moran and the *Empress of Mars*, a story which is already a legend of the spaceways. And it's a damn good story too. I ought to know, having framed the first version of it myself.

For I was there, right in the Rigel Royal, when it all began on the night that Cliff Moran blew in, looking lower than an antman's belly and twice as nasty. He'd had a spell of luck foul enough to twist a man into a slug-snake and we all knew that there was an attachment out for his ship. Cliff had fought his way up from the back courts of Venaport. Lose his ship and he'd slip back there—to rot. He was at the snarling stage that night when he picked out a table for himself and set out to drink away his troubles.

However, just as the first bottle arrived, so did a visitor. Steena came out of her corner, Bat curled around her shoulders stole-wise, his favorite mode of travel. She crossed over and dropped down without invitation at Cliff's side. That shook him out of his sulks. Because Steena never chose company when she could be alone. If one of the man-stones on Ganymede had come stumping in, it wouldn't have made more of us look out of the corners of our eyes.

She stretched out one long-fingered hand and set aside the bottle he had ordered and said only one thing, "It's about time for the *Empress of Mars* to appear again."

Cliff scowled and bit his lip. He was tough, tough as jet lining—you have to be granite inside and out to struggle up from Venaport to a ship command. But we could guess what was running through his mind at that moment. The *Empress of Mars* was just about the biggest prize a spacer could aim for. But in the fifty years she had been following her queer derelict orbit through space many men had tried to bring her in—and none had succeeded.

A pleasure-ship carrying untold wealth, she had been mysteriously abandoned in space by passengers and crew, none of whom had ever been seen or heard of again. At intervals thereafter she had been sighted, even boarded. Those who ventured into her either vanished or returned swiftly without any believable explanation of what they had seen—wanting only to get away from her as quickly

as possible. But the man who could bring her in—or even strip her clean in space—that man would win the jackpot.

"All right!" Cliff slammed his fist down on the table. "I'll try even that!"

Steena looked at him, much as she must have looked at Bat the day Bub Nelson brought him to her, and nodded. That was all I saw. The rest of the story came to me in pieces, months later and in another port half the System away.

Cliff took off that night. He was afraid to risk waiting—with a writ out that could pull the ship from under him. And it wasn't until he was in space that he discovered his passengers—Steena and Bat. We'll never know what happened then. I'm betting that Steena made no explanation at all. She wouldn't.

It was the first time she had decided to cash in on her own tip and she was there—that was all. Maybe that point weighed with Cliff, maybe he just didn't care. Anyway the three were together when they sighted the *Empress of Mars* riding, her dead-lights gleaming, a ghost ship in night space.

She must have been an eerie sight because her other lights were on too, in addition to the red warnings at her nose. She seemed alive, a Flying Dutchman of space. Cliff worked his ship skillfully alongside and had no trouble in snapping magnetic lines to her lock. Some minutes later the three of them passed into her. There was still air in her cabins and corridors. Air that bore a faint corrupt taint which set Bat to sniffing greedily and could be picked up even by the less sensitive human nostrils.

Cliff headed straight for the control cabin but Steena and Bat went prowling. Closed doors were a challenge to both of them and Steena opened each as she passed, taking a quick look at what lay within. The fifth door opened on a room which no woman could leave without further investigation.

I don't know who had been housed there when the *Empress* left port on her last lengthy cruise. Anyone really curious can check back on the old photo-reg cards. But there was a lavish display of silks trailing out of two travel kits on the floor, a dressing table crowded with crystal and jeweled containers, along with other lures for the female which drew Steena in. She was standing in front of the dressing table when she glanced into the mirror—glanced into it and froze.

Over her right shoulder she could see the spider-silk cover on the bed. Right in the middle of that sheer, gossamer expanse was a sparkling heap of gems, the dumped contents of some jewel case. Bat had jumped to the foot of the bed and flattened out as cats will, watching those gems, watching them and—something else!

Steena put out her hand blindly and caught up the nearest bottle. As she unstoppered it she watched the mirrored bed. A gemmed bracelet rose from the pile, rose in the air and tinkled its siren song. It was as if an idle hand played.... Bat spat almost noiselessly. But he did not retreat. Bat had not yet decided his course.

She put down the bottle. Then she did something which perhaps few of the men she had listened to through the years could have done. She moved without hurry or sign of disturbance on a tour about the room. And, although she approached the bed she did not touch the jewels. She could not force herself to that. It took her five minutes to play out her innocence and unconcern. Then it was Bat who decided the issue.

He leaped from the bed and escorted something to the door, remaining a careful distance behind. Then he mewed loudly twice. Steena followed him and opened the door wider.

Bat went straight on down the corridor, as intent as a hound on the warmest of scents. Steena strolled behind him, holding her pace to the unhurried gait of an explorer. What sped before them both was invisible to her but Bat was never baffled by it.

They must have gone into the control cabin almost on the heels of the unseen—if the unseen had heels, which there was good reason to doubt—for Bat crouched just within the doorway and refused to move on. Steena looked down the length of the instrument panels and officers' station-seats to where Cliff Moran worked. On the heavy carpet her boots made no sound and he did not glance up but sat humming through set teeth as he tested the tardy and reluctant responses to buttons which had not been pushed in years.

To human eyes they were alone in the cabin. But Bat still followed a moving something with his gaze. And it was something which he had at last made up his mind to distrust and dislike. For now he took a step or two forward and spat—his loathing made plain by every raised hair along his spine. And in that same moment Steena saw a flicker—a flicker of vague outline against Cliff's hunched shoulders as if the invisible one had crossed the space between them.

But why had it been revealed against Cliff and not against the back of one of the seats or against the panels, the walls of the corridor or the cover of the bed where it had reclined and played with its loot? What could Bat see?

The storehouse memory that had served Steena so well through the years clicked open a half-forgotten door. With one swift motion she tore loose her spaceall and flung the baggy garment across the back of the nearest seat.

Bat was snarling now, emitting the throaty rising cry that was his hunting song. But he was edging back, back toward Steena's feet, shrinking from something he could not fight but which he faced defiantly. If he could draw it after him, past that dangling spaceall.... He had to—it was their only chance.

"What the...." Cliff had come out of his seat and was staring at them.

What he saw must have been weird enough. Steena, bare-armed and shouldered, her usually stiffly-netted hair falling wildly down her back, Steena watching empty space with narrowed eyes and set mouth, calculating a single wild

chance. Bat, crouched on his belly, retreating from thin air step by step and wailing like a demon.

"Toss me your blaster." Steena gave the order calmly—as if they still sat at their table in the Rigel Royal.

And as quietly Cliff obeyed. She caught the small weapon out of the air with a steady hand—caught and leveled it.

"Stay just where you are!" she warned. "Back, Bat, bring it back!"

With a last throat-splitting screech of rage and hate, Bat twisted to safety between her boots. She pressed with thumb and forefinger, firing at the spacealls. The material turned to powdery flakes of ash—except for certain bits which still flapped from the scorched seat—as if something had protected them from the force of the blast. Bat sprang straight up in the air with a scream that tore their ears.

"What...?" began Cliff again.

Steena made a warning motion with her left hand. "*Wait!*"

She was still tense, still watching Bat. The cat dashed madly around the cabin twice, running crazily with white-ringed eyes and flecks of foam on his muzzle. Then he stopped abruptly in the doorway, stopped and looked back over his shoulder for a long silent moment. He sniffed delicately.

Steena and Cliff could smell it too now, a thick oily stench which was not the usual odor left by an exploding blaster-shell.

Bat came back, treading daintily across the carpet, almost on the tips of his paws. He raised his head as he passed Steena and then he went confidently beyond to sniff, to sniff and spit twice at the unburned strips of the spaceall. Having thus paid his respects to the late enemy he sat down calmly and set to washing his fur with deliberation. Steena sighed once and dropped into the navigator's seat.

"Maybe now you'll tell me what in the hell's happened?" Cliff exploded as he took the blaster out of her hand.

"Gray," she said dazedly, "it must have been gray—or I couldn't have seen it like that. I'm colorblind, you see. I can see only shades of gray—my whole world is gray. Like Bat's—his world is gray too—all gray. But he's been compensated for he can see above and below our range of color vibrations and—apparently—so can I!"

Her voice quavered and she raised her chin with a new air Cliff had never seen before—a sort of proud acceptance. She pushed back her wandering hair, but she made no move to imprison it under the heavy net again.

"That is why I saw the thing when it crossed between us. Against your spaceall it was another shade of gray—an outline. So I put out mine and waited for it to show against that—it was our only chance, Cliff.

"It was curious at first, I think, and it knew we couldn't see it—which is why it waited to attack. But when Bat's actions gave it away it moved. So I waited to see that flicker against the spaceall and then I let him have it. It's really very simple...."

Cliff laughed a bit shakily. "But what *was* this gray thing? I don't get it."

"I think it was what made the *Empress* a derelict. Something out of space, maybe, or from another world somewhere." She waved her hands. "It's invisible because it's a color beyond our range of sight. It must have stayed in here all these years. And it kills—it must—when its curiosity is satisfied." Swiftly she described the scene in the cabin and the strange behavior of the gem pile which had betrayed the creature to her.

Cliff did not return his blaster to its holder. "Any more of them on board, d'you think?" He didn't look pleased at the prospect.

Steena turned to Bat. He was paying particular attention to the space between two front toes in the process of a complete bath. "I don't think so. But Bat will tell us if there are. He can see them clearly, I believe."

But there weren't any more and two weeks later Cliff, Steena and Bat brought the *Empress* into the Lunar quarantine station. And that is the end of Steena's story because, as we have been told, happy marriages need no chronicles. And Steena had found someone who knew of her gray world and did not find it too hard to share with her—someone besides Bat. It turned out to be a real love match.

The last time I saw her she was wrapped in a flame-red cloak from the looms of Rigel and wore a fortune in Jovan rubies blazing on her wrists. Cliff was flipping a three-figure credit bill to a waiter. And Bat had a row of Vernal juice glasses set up before him. Just a little family party out on the town.

BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER

1 Conan Loses His Ax

The stillness of the forest trail was so primeval that the tread of a soft-booted foot was a startling disturbance. At least it seemed so to the ears of the wayfarer, though he was moving along the path with the caution that must be practised by any man who ventures beyond Thunder River. He was a young man of medium height, with an open countenance and a mop of tousled tawny hair unconfined by cap or helmet. His garb was common enough for that country—a coarse tunic, belted at the waist, short leather breeches beneath, and soft buckskin boots that came short of the knee. A knife-hilt jutted from one boot-top. The broad leather belt supported a short, heavy sword and a buckskin pouch. There was no perturbation in the wide eyes that scanned the green walls which fringed the trail. Though not tall, he was well built, and the arms that the short wide sleeves of the tunic left bare were thick with corded muscle.

He tramped imperturbably along, although the last settler's cabin lay miles

behind him, and each step was carrying him nearer the grim peril that hung like a brooding shadow over the ancient forest.

He was not making as much noise as it seemed to him, though he well knew that the faint tread of his booted feet would be like a tocsin of alarm to the fierce ears that might be lurking in the treacherous green fastness. His careless attitude was not genuine; his eyes and ears were keenly alert, especially his ears, for no gaze could penetrate the leafy tangle for more than a few feet in either direction.

But it was instinct more than any warning by the external senses which brought him up suddenly, his hand on his hilt. He stood stock-still in the middle of the trail, unconsciously holding his breath, wondering what he had heard, and wondering if indeed he had heard anything. The silence seemed absolute. Not a squirrel chattered or bird chirped. Then his gaze fixed itself on a mass of bushes beside the trail a few yards ahead of him. There was no breeze, yet he had seen a branch quiver. The short hairs on his scalp prickled, and he stood for an instant undecided, certain that a move in either direction would bring death streaking at him from the bushes.

A heavy chopping crunch sounded behind the leaves. The bushes were shaken violently, and simultaneously with the sound, an arrow arched erratically from among them and vanished among the trees along the trail. The wayfarer glimpsed its flight as he sprang frantically to cover.

Crouching behind a thick stem, his sword quivering in his fingers, he saw the bushes part, and a tall figure stepped leisurely into the trail. The traveler stared in surprise. The stranger was clad like himself in regard to boots and breeks, though the latter were of silk instead of leather. But he wore a sleeveless hauberk of dark mesh-mail in place of a tunic, and a helmet perched on his black mane. That helmet held the other's gaze; it was without a crest, but adorned by short bull's horns. No civilized hand ever forged that head-piece. Nor was the face below it that of a civilized man: dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes, it was a face untamed as the primordial forest which formed its background. The man held a broadsword in his right hand, and the edge was smeared with crimson.

'Come on out,' he called, in an accent unfamiliar to the wayfarer. 'All's safe now. There was only one of the dogs. Come on out.'

The other emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on the proportions of the forest man—the massive iron-clad breast, and the arm that bore the reddened sword, burned dark by the sun and ridged and corded with muscles. He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even of that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers.

Turning, he stepped back to the bushes and pulled them apart. Still not certain just what had happened, the wayfarer from the east advanced and stared down

into the bushes. A man lay there, a short, dark, thickly-muscled man, naked except for a loin-cloth, a necklace of human teeth and a brass armlet. A short sword was thrust into the girdle of the loin-cloth, and one hand still gripped a heavy black bow. The man had long black hair; that was about all the wayfarer could tell about his head, for his features were a mask of blood and brains. His skull had been split to the teeth.

'A Pict, by the gods!' exclaimed the wayfarer.

The burning blue eyes turned upon him.

'Are you surprised?'

'Why, they told me at Velitrium and again at the settlers' cabins along the road, that these devils sometimes sneaked across the border, but I didn't expect to meet one this far in the interior.'

'You're only four miles east of Black River,' the stranger informed him. 'They've been shot within a mile of Velitrium. No settler between Thunder River and Fort Tuscelan is really safe. I picked up this dog's trail three miles south of the fort this morning, and I've been following him ever since. I came up behind him just as he was drawing an arrow on you. Another instant and there'd have been a stranger in Hell. But I spoiled his aim for him.'

The wayfarer was staring wide-eyed at the larger man, dumfounded by the realization that the man had actually tracked down one of the forest-devils and slain him unsuspected. That implied woodsmanship of a quality undreamed, even for Conajohara.

'You are one of the fort's garrison?' he asked.

'I'm no soldier. I draw the pay and rations of an officer of the line, but I do my work in the woods. Valannus knows I'm of more use ranging along the river than cooped up in the fort.'

Casually the slayer shoved the body deeper into the thickets with his foot, pulled the bushes together and turned away down the trail. The other followed him.

'My name is Balthus,' he offered. 'I was at Velitrium last night. I haven't decided whether I'll take up a hide of land, or enter fort-service.'

'The best land near Thunder River is already taken,' grunted the slayer. 'Plenty of good land between Scalp Creek—you crossed it a few miles back—and the fort, but that's getting too devilish close to the river. The Picts steal over to burn and murder—as that one did. They don't always come singly. Some day they'll try to sweep the settlers out of Conajohara. And they may succeed—probably will succeed. This colonization business is mad, anyway. There's plenty of good land east of the Bossonian marches. If the Aquilonians would cut up some of the big estates of their barons, and plant wheat where now only deer are hunted, they wouldn't have to cross the border and take the land of the Picts away from them.'

'That's queer talk from a man in the service of the Governor of Conajohara,' objected Balthus.

'It's nothing to me,' the other retorted. 'I'm a mercenary. I sell my sword to the highest bidder. I never planted wheat and never will, so long as there are other harvests to be reaped with the sword. But you Hyborians have expanded as far as you'll be allowed to expand. You've crossed the marches, burned a few villages, exterminated a few clans and pushed back the frontier to Black River; but I doubt if you'll even be able to hold what you've conquered, and you'll never push the frontier any further westward. Your idiotic king doesn't understand conditions here. He won't send you enough reinforcements, and there are not enough settlers to withstand the shock of a concerted attack from across the river.'

'But the Picts are divided into small clans,' persisted Balthus. 'they'll never unite. We can whip any single clan.'

'Or any three or four clans,' admitted the slayer. 'But some day a man will rise and unite thirty or forty clans, just as was done among the Cimmerians, when the Gundermen tried to push the border northward, years ago. They tried to colonize the southern marches of Cimmeria: destroyed a few small clans, built a fort-town, Venarium—you've heard the tale.'

'So I have indeed,' replied Balthus, wincing. The memory of that red disaster was a black blot in the chronicles of a proud and war-like people. 'My uncle was at Venarium when the Cimmerians swarmed over the walls. He was one of the few who escaped that slaughter. I've heard him tell the tale, many a time. The barbarians swept out of the hills in a ravening horde, without warning, and stormed Venarium with such fury none could stand before them. Men, women and children were butchered. Venarium was reduced to a mass of charred ruins, as it is to this day. The Aquilonians were driven back across the marches, and have never since tried to colonize the Cimmerian country. But you speak of Venarium familiarly. Perhaps you were there?'

'I was,' grunted the other. 'I was one of the horde that swarmed over the hills. I hadn't yet seen fifteen snows, but already my name was repeated about the council fires.'

Balthus involuntarily recoiled, staring. It seemed incredible that the man walking tranquilly at his side should have been one of those screeching, blood-mad devils that had poured over the walls of Venarium on that long-gone day to make her streets run crimson.

'Then you, too, are a barbarian!' he exclaimed involuntarily.

The other nodded, without taking offence.

'I am Conan, a Cimmerian.'

'I've heard of you.' Fresh interest quickened Balthus' gaze. No wonder the Pict had fallen victim to his own sort of subtlety. The Cimmerians were barbarians

as ferocious as the Picts, and much more intelligent. Evidently Conan had spent much time among civilized men, though that contact had obviously not softened him, nor weakened any of his primitive instincts. Balthus' apprehension turned to admiration as he marked the easy cat-like stride, the effortless silence with which the Cimmerian moved along the trail. The oiled links of his armor did not clink, and Balthus knew Conan could glide through the deepest thicket or most tangled copse as noiselessly as any naked Pict that ever lived.

'You're not a Gunderman?' It was more assertion than question.

Balthus shook his head. 'I'm from the Tauran.'

'I've seen good woodsmen from the Tauran. But the Bossonians have sheltered you Aquilonians from the outer wildernesses for too many centuries. You need hardening.'

That was true; the Bossonian marches, with their fortified villages filled with determined bowmen, had long served Aquilonia as a buffer against the outlying barbarians. Now among the settlers beyond Thunder River there was growing up a breed of forest-men capable of meeting the barbarians at their own game, but their numbers were still scanty. Most of the frontiersmen were like Balthus—more of the settler than the woodsman type.

The sun had not set, but it was no longer in sight, hidden as it was behind the dense forest wall. The shadows were lengthening, deepening back in the woods as the companions strode on down the trail.

'It will be dark before we reach the fort,' commented Conan casually; then: 'Listen!'

He stopped short, half crouching, sword ready, transformed into a savage figure of suspicion and menace, poised to spring and rend. Balthus had heard it too—a wild scream that broke at its highest note. It was the cry of a man in dire fear or agony.

Conan was off in an instant, racing down the trail, each stride widening the distance between him and his straining companion. Balthus puffed a curse. Among the settlements of the Tauran he was accounted a good runner, but Conan was leaving him behind with maddening ease. Then Balthus forgot his exasperation as his ears were outraged by the most frightful cry he had ever heard. It was not human, this one; it was a demoniacal caterwauling of hideous triumph that seemed to exult over fallen humanity and find echo in black gulfs beyond human ken.

Balthus faltered in his stride, and clammy sweat beaded his flesh. But Conan did not hesitate; he darted around a bend in the trail and disappeared, and Balthus, panicky at finding himself alone with that awful scream still shuddering through the forest in grisly echoes, put on an extra burst of speed and plunged after him.

The Aquilonian slid to a stumbling halt, almost colliding with the Cimmerian who stood in the trail over a crumpled body. But Conan was not looking at the

corpse which lay there in the crimson-soaked dust. He was glaring into the deep woods on either side of the trail.

Balthus muttered a horrified oath. It was the body of a man which lay there in the trail, a short, fat man, clad in the gilt-worked boots and (despite the heat) the ermine-trimmed tunic of a wealthy merchant. His fat, pale face was set in a stare of frozen horror; his thick throat had been slashed from ear to ear as if by a razor-sharp blade. The short sword still in its scabbard seemed to indicate that he had been struck down without a chance to fight for his life.

'A Pict?' Balthus whispered, as he turned to peer into the deepening shadows of the forest.

Conan shook his head and straightened to scowl down at the dead man.

'A forest devil. This is the fifth, by Crom!'

'What do you mean?'

'Did you ever hear of a Pictish wizard called Zogar Sag?'

Balthus shook his head uneasily.

'He dwells in Gwawela, the nearest village across the river. Three months ago he hid beside this road and stole a string of pack-mules from a pack-train bound for the fort—drugged their drivers, somehow. The mules belonged to this man'—Conan casually indicated the corpse with his foot—'Tiberias, a merchant of Velitrium. They were loaded with ale-kegs, and old Zogar stopped to guzzle before he got across the river. A woodsman named Soractus trailed him, and led Valannus and three soldiers to where he lay dead drunk in a thicket. At the importunities of Tiberias, Valannus threw Zogar Sag into a cell, which is the worst insult you can give a Pict. He managed to kill his guard and escape, and sent back word that he meant to kill Tiberias and the five men who captured him in a way that would make Aquilonians shudder for centuries to come.

'Well, Soractus and the soldiers are dead. Soractus was killed on the river, the soldiers in the very shadow of the fort. And now Tiberias is dead. No Pict killed any of them. Each victim—except Tiberias, as you see—lacked his head—which no doubt is now ornamenting the altar of Zogar Sag's particular god.'

'How do you know they weren't killed by the Picts?' demanded Balthus.

Conan pointed to the corpse of the merchant.

'You think that was done with a knife or a sword? Look closer and you'll see that only a talon could have made a gash like that. The flesh is ripped, not cut.'

'Perhaps a panther——' began Balthus, without conviction.

Conan shook his head impatiently.

'A man from the Tauran couldn't mistake the mark of a panther's claws. No. It's a forest devil summoned by Zogar Sag to carry out his revenge. Tiberias was a fool to start for Velitrium alone, and so close to dusk. But each one of the victims

seemed to be smitten with madness just before doom overtook him. Look here; the signs are plain enough. Tiberias came riding along the trail on his mule, maybe with a bundle of choice otter pelts behind his saddle to sell in Velitrium, and the _thing_ sprang on him from behind that bush. See where the branches are crushed down.

'Tiberias gave one scream, and then his throat was torn open and he was selling his otter skins in Hell. The mule ran away into the woods. Listen! Even now you can hear him thrashing about under the trees. The demon didn't have time to take Tiberias' head; it took fright as we came up.'

'As *you* came up,' amended Balthus. 'It must not be a very terrible creature if it flees from one armed man. But how do you know it was not a Pict with some kind of a hook that rips instead of slicing? Did you see it?'

'Tiberias was an armed man,' grunted Conan. 'If Zogar Sag can bring demons to aid him, he can tell them which men to kill and which to let alone. No, I didn't see it. I only saw the bushes shake as it left the trail. But if you want further proof, look here!'

The slayer had stepped into the pool of blood in which the dead man sprawled. Under the bushes at the edge of the path there was a footprint, made in blood on the hard loam.

'Did a man make that?' demanded Conan.

Balthus felt his scalp prickle. Neither man nor any beast that he had ever seen could have left that strange, monstrous three-toed print, that was curiously combined of the bird and the reptile, yet a true type of neither. He spread his fingers above the print, careful not to touch it, and grunted explosively. He could not span the mark.

'What is it?' he whispered. 'I never saw a beast that left a spoor like that.'

'Nor any other sane man,' answered Conan grimly. 'It's a swamp demon—they're thick as bats in the swamps beyond Black River. You can hear them howling like damned souls when the wind blows strong from the south on hot nights.'

'What shall we do?' asked the Aquilonian, peering uneasily into the deep blue shadows. The frozen fear on the dead countenance haunted him. He wondered what hideous head the wretch had seen thrust grinning from among the leaves to chill his blood with terror.

'No use to try to follow a demon,' grunted Conan, drawing a short woodsman's ax from his girdle. 'I tried tracking him after he killed Soractus. I lost his trail within a dozen steps. He might have grown himself wings and flown away, or sunk down through the earth to Hell. I don't know. I'm not going after the mule, either. It'll either wander back to the fort, or to some settler's cabin.'

As he spoke Conan was busy at the edge of the trail with his ax. With a few strokes he cut a pair of saplings nine or ten feet long, and denuded them of their

branches. Then he cut a length from a serpent-like vine that crawled among the bushes near by, and making one end fast to one of the poles, a couple of feet from the end, whipped the vine over the other sapling and interlaced it back and forth. In a few moments he had a crude but strong litter.

'The demon isn't going to get Tiberias' head if I can help it,' he growled. 'We'll carry the body into the fort. It isn't more than three miles. I never liked the fat fool, but we can't have Pictish devils making so cursed free with white men's heads.'

The Picts were a white race, though swarthy, but the border men never spoke of them as such.

Balthus took the rear end of the litter, onto which Conan unceremoniously dumped the unfortunate merchant, and they moved on down the trail as swiftly as possible. Conan made no more noise laden with their grim burden than he had made when unencumbered. He had made a loop with the merchant's belt at the end of the poles, and was carrying his share of the load with one hand, while the other gripped his naked broadsword, and his restless gaze roved the sinister walls about them. The shadows were thickening. A darkening blue mist blurred the outlines of the foliage. The forest deepened in the twilight, became a blue haunt of mystery sheltering unguessed things.

They had covered more than a mile, and the muscles in Balthus' sturdy arms were beginning to ache a little, when a cry rang shuddering from the woods whose blue shadows were deepening into purple.

Conan started convulsively, and Balthus almost let go the poles.

'A woman!' cried the younger man. 'Great Mitra, a woman cried out then!'

'A settler's wife straying in the woods,' snarled Conan, setting down his end of the litter. 'Looking for a cow, probably, and—stay here!'

He dived like a hunting wolf into the leafy wall. Balthus' hair bristled.

'Stay here alone with this corpse and a devil hiding in the woods?' he yelped. 'I'm coming with you!'

And suiting action to words, he plunged after the Cimmerian. Conan glanced back at him, but made no objection, though he did not moderate his pace to accommodate the shorter legs of his companion. Balthus wasted his wind in swearing as the Cimmerian drew away from him again, like a phantom between the trees, and then Conan burst into a dim glade and halted crouching, lips snarling, sword lifted.

'What are we stopping for?' panted Balthus, dashing the sweat out of his eyes and gripping his short sword.

'That scream came from this glade, or near by,' answered Conan. 'I don't mistake the location of sounds, even in the woods. But where——'

Abruptly the sound rang out again—_behind them_; in the direction of the trail they had just quitted. It rose piercingly and pitifully, the cry of a woman in frantic terror—and then, shockingly, it changed to a yell of mocking laughter that might have burst from the lips of a fiend of lower Hell.

'What in Mitra's name——' Balthus' face was a pale blur in the gloom.

With a scorching oath Conan wheeled and dashed back the way he had come, and the Aquilonian stumbled bewilderedly after him. He blundered into the Cimmerian as the latter stopped dead, and rebounded from his brawny shoulders as though from an iron statue. Gasping from the impact, he heard Conan's breath hiss through his teeth. The Cimmerian seemed frozen in his tracks.

Looking over his shoulder, Balthus felt his hair stand up stiffly. Something was moving through the deep bushes that fringed the trail—something that neither walked nor flew, but seemed to glide like a serpent. But it was not a serpent. Its outlines were indistinct, but it was taller than a man, and not very bulky. It gave off a glimmer of weird light, like a faint blue flame. Indeed, the eery fire was the only tangible thing about it. It might have been an embodied flame moving with reason and purpose through the blackening woods.

Conan snarled a savage curse and hurled his ax with ferocious will. But the thing glided on without altering its course. Indeed it was only a few instants' fleeting glimpse they had of it—a tall, shadowy thing of misty flame floating through the thickets. Then it was gone, and the forest crouched in breathless stillness.

With a snarl Conan plunged through the intervening foliage and into the trail. His profanity, as Balthus floundered after him, was lurid and impassioned. The Cimmerian was standing over the litter on which lay the body of Tiberias. And that body no longer possessed a head.

'Tricked us with its damnable caterwauling!' raved Conan, swinging his great sword about his head in his wrath. 'I might have known! I might have guessed a trick! Now there'll be five heads to decorate Zogar's altar.'

'But what thing is it that can cry like a woman and laugh like a devil, and shines like witch-fire as it glides through the trees?' gasped Balthus, mopping the sweat from his pale face.

'A swamp devil,' responded Conan morosely. 'Grab those poles. We'll take in the body, anyway. At least our load's a bit lighter.'

With which grim philosophy he gripped the leathery loop and stalked down the trail.

2 The Wizard of Gwawela

Fort Tuscelan stood on the eastern bank of Black River, the tides of which washed the foot of the stockade. The latter was of logs, as were all the buildings

within, including the donjon (to dignify it by that appellation), in which were the governor's quarters, overlooking the stockade and the sullen river. Beyond that river lay a huge forest, which approached jungle-like density along the spongy shores. Men paced the runways along the log parapet day and night, watching that dense green wall. Seldom a menacing figure appeared, but the sentries knew that they too were watched, fiercely, hungrily, with the mercilessness of ancient hate. The forest beyond the river might seem desolate and vacant of life to the ignorant eye, but life teemed there, not alone of bird and beast and reptile, but also of men, the fiercest of all the hunting beasts.

There, at the fort, civilization ended. Fort Tuscelan was the last outpost of a civilized world; it represented the westernmost thrust of the dominant Hyborian races. Beyond the river the primitive still reigned in shadowy forests, brush-thatched huts where hung the grinning skulls of men, and mud-walled enclosures where fires flickered and drums rumbled, and spears were whetted in the hands of dark, silent men with tangled black hair and the eyes of serpents. Those eyes often glared through the bushes at the fort across the river. Once dark-skinned men had built their huts where that fort stood; yes, and their huts had risen where now stood the fields and log cabins of fair-haired settlers, back beyond Velitrium, that raw, turbulent frontier town on the banks of Thunder River, to the shores of that other river that bounds the Bossonian marches. Traders had come, and priests of Mitra who walked with bare feet and empty hands, and died horribly, most of them; but soldiers had followed, and men with axes in their hands and women and children in ox-drawn wains. Back to Thunder River, and still back, beyond Black River the aborigines had been pushed, with slaughter and massacre. But the dark-skinned people did not forget that once Conajohara had been theirs.

The guard inside the eastern gate bawled a challenge. Through a barred aperture torchlight flickered, glinting on a steel head-piece and suspicious eyes beneath it.

'Open the gate,' snorted Conan. 'You see it's I, don't you?'

Military discipline put his teeth on edge.

The gate swung inward and Conan and his companion passed through. Balthus noted that the gate was flanked by a tower on each side, the summits of which rose above the stockade. He saw loopholes for arrows.

The guardsmen grunted as they saw the burden borne between the men. Their pikes jangled against each other as they thrust shut the gate, chin on shoulder, and Conan asked testily: 'Have you never seen a headless body before?'

The face of the soldiers were pallid in the torchlight.

'That's Tiberias,' blurted one. 'I recognize that fur-trimmed tunic. Valerius here owes me five lunas. I told him Tiberias had heard the loon call when he rode through the gate on his mule, with his glassy stare. I wagered he'd come back

without his head.'

Conan grunted enigmatically, motioned Balthus to ease the litter to the ground, and then strode off toward the governor's quarters, with the Aquilonian at his heels. The tousle-headed youth stared about him eagerly and curiously, noting the rows of barracks along the walls, the stables, the tiny merchants' stalls, the towering blockhouse, and the other buildings, with the open square in the middle where the soldiers drilled, and where, now, fires danced and men off duty lounged. These were now hurrying to join the morbid crowd gathered about the litter at the gate. The rangy figures of Aquilonian pikemen and forest runners mingled with the shorter, stockier forms of Bossonian archers.

He was not greatly surprised that the governor received them himself. Autocratic society with its rigid caste laws lay east of the marches. Valannus was still a young man, well knit, with a finely chiseled countenance already carved into sober cast by toil and responsibility.

'You left the fort before daybreak, I was told,' he said to Conan. 'I had begun to fear that the Picts had caught you at last.'

'When they smoke my head the whole river will know it,' grunted Conan. 'They'll hear Pictish women wailing their dead as far as Velitrium—I was on a lone scout. I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing drums talking across the river.'

'They talk each night,' reminded the governor, his fine eyes shadowed, as he stared closely at Conan. He had learned the unwisdom of discounting wild men's instincts.

'There was a difference last night,' growled Conan. 'There has been ever since Zogar Sag got back across the river.'

'We should either have given him presents and sent him home, or else hanged him,' sighed the governor. 'You advised that, but——'

'But it's hard for you Hyborians to learn the ways of the outlands,' said Conan. 'Well, it can't be helped now, but there'll be no peace on the border so long as Zogar lives and remembers the cell he sweated in. I was following a warrior who slipped over to put a few white notches on his bow. After I split his head I fell in with this lad whose name is Balthus and who's come from the Tauran to help hold the frontier.'

Valannus approvingly eyed the young man's frank countenance and strongly-knit frame.

'I am glad to welcome you, young sir. I wish more of your people would come. We need men used to forest life. Many of our soldiers and some of our settlers are from the eastern provinces and know nothing of woodcraft, or even of agricultural life.'

'Not many of that breed this side of Velitrium,' grunted Conan. 'That town's full of them, though. But listen, Valannus, we found Tiberias dead on the trail.' And

in a few words he related the grisly affair.

Valannus paled. 'I did not know he had left the fort. He must have been mad!'

'He was,' answered Conan. 'Like the other four; each one, when his time came, went mad and rushed into the woods to meet his death like a hare running down the throat of a python. _Something_ called to them from the deeps of the forest, something the men call a loon, for lack of a better name, but only the doomed ones could hear it. Zogar Sag has made a magic that Aquilonian civilization can't overcome.'

To this thrust Valannus made no reply; he wiped his brow with a shaky hand.

'Do the soldiers know of this?'

'We left the body by the eastern gate.'

'You should have concealed the fact, hidden the corpse somewhere in the woods. The soldiers are nervous enough already.'

'They'd have found it out some way. If I'd hidden the body, it would have been returned to the fort as the corpse of Soractus was—tied up outside the gate for the men to find in the morning.'

Valannus shuddered. Turning, he walked to a casement and stared silently out over the river, black and shiny under the glint of the stars. Beyond the river the jungle rose like an ebony wall. The distant screech of a panther broke the stillness. The night pressed in, blurring the sounds of the soldiers outside the block-house, dimming the fires. A wind whispered through the black branches, rippling the dusky water. On its wings came a low, rhythmic pulsing, sinister as the pad of a leopard's foot.

'After all,' said Valannus, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, 'what do we know—what does anyone know—of the things that jungle may hide? We have dim rumors of great swamps and rivers, and a forest that stretches on and on over everlasting plains and hills to end at last on the shores of the western ocean. But what things lie between this river and that ocean we dare not even guess. No white man has ever plunged deep into that fastness and returned alive to tell us what he found. We are wise in our civilized knowledge, but our knowledge extends just so far—to the western bank of that ancient river! Who knows what shapes earthly and unearthly may lurk beyond the dim circle of light our knowledge has cast?

'Who knows what gods are worshipped under the shadows of that heathen forest, or what devils crawl out of the black ooze of the swamps? Who can be sure that all the inhabitants of that black country are natural? Zogar Sag—a sage of the eastern cities would sneer at his primitive magic-making as the mummery of a fakir; yet he has driven mad and killed five men in a manner no man can explain. I wonder if he himself is wholly human.'

'If I can get within ax-throwing distance of him I'll settle that question,' growled Conan, helping himself to the governor's wine and pushing a glass toward Balthus, who took it hesitatingly, and with an uncertain glance toward Valannus.

The governor turned toward Conan and stared at him thoughtfully.

'The soldiers, who do not believe in ghosts or devils,' he said, 'are almost in a panic of fear. You, who believe in ghosts, ghouls, goblins, and all manner of uncanny things, do not seem to fear any of the things in which you believe.'

'There's nothing in the universe cold steel won't cut,' answered Conan. 'I threw my ax at the demon, and he took no hurt, but I might have missed, in the dusk, or a branch deflected its flight. I'm not going out of my way looking for devils; but I wouldn't step out of my path to let one go by.'

Valannus lifted his head and met Conan's gaze squarely.

'Conan, more depends on you than you realize. You know the weakness of this province—a slender wedge thrust into the untamed wilderness. You know that the lives of all the people west of the marches depend on this fort. Were it to fall, red axes would be splintering the gates of Velitrium before a horseman could cross the marches. His majesty, or his majesty's advisers, have ignored my plea that more troops be sent to hold the frontier. They know nothing of border conditions, and are averse to expending any more money in this direction. The fate of the frontier depends upon the men who now hold it.

'You know that most of the army which conquered Conajohara has been withdrawn. You know the force left me is inadequate, especially since that devil Zogar Sag managed to poison our water supply, and forty men died in one day. Many of the others are sick, or have been bitten by serpents or mauled by wild beasts which seem to swarm in increasing numbers in the vicinity of the fort. The soldiers believe Zogar's boast that he could summon the forest beasts to slay his enemies.

'I have three hundred pikemen, four hundred Bossonian archers, and perhaps fifty men who, like yourself, are skilled in woodcraft. They are worth ten times their number of soldiers, but there are so few of them. Frankly, Conan, my situation is becoming precarious. The soldiers whisper of desertion; they are low-spirited, believing Zogar Sag has loosed devils on us. They fear the black plague with which he threatened us—the terrible black death of the swamplands. When I see a sick soldier I sweat with fear of seeing him turn black and shrivel and die before my eyes.

'Conan, if the plague is loosed upon us, the soldiers will desert in a body! The border will be left unguarded and nothing will check the sweep of the dark-skinned hordes to the very gates of Velitrium—maybe beyond! If we can not hold the fort, how can they hold the town?

'Conan, Zogar Sag must die, if we are to hold Conajohara. You have penetrated the unknown deeper than any other man in the fort; you know where Gwawela stands, and something of the forest trails across the river. Will you take a band of men tonight and endeavour to kill or capture him? Oh, I know it's mad. There isn't more than one chance in a thousand that any of you will come back alive. But if we don't get him, it's death for us all. You can take as many men as you wish.'

'A dozen men are better for a job like that than a regiment,' answered Conan. 'Five hundred men couldn't fight their way to Gwawela and back, but a dozen might slip in and out again. Let me pick my men. I don't want any soldiers.'

'Let me go!' eagerly exclaimed Balthus. 'I've hunted deer all my life on the Tauran.'

'All right. Valannus, we'll eat at the stall where the foresters gather, and I'll pick my men. We'll start within an hour, drop down the river in a boat to a point below the village and then steal upon it through the woods. If we live, we should be back by daybreak.'

3 The Crawlers in the Dark

The river was a vague trace between walls of ebony. The paddles that propelled the long boat creeping along in the dense shadow of the eastern bank dipped softly into the water, making no more noise than the beak of a heron. The broad shoulders of the man in front of Balthus were a blur in the dense gloom. He knew that not even the keen eyes of the man who knelt in the prow would discern anything more than a few feet ahead of them. Conan was feeling his way by instinct and an intensive familiarity with the river.

No one spoke. Balthus had had a good look at his companions in the fort before they slipped out of the stockade and down the bank into the waiting canoe. They were of a new breed growing up in the world on the raw edge of the frontier—men whom grim necessity had taught woodcraft. Aquilonians of the western provinces to a man, they had many points in common. They dressed alike—in buckskin boots, leathern breeks and deerskin shirts, with broad girdles that held axes and short swords; and they were all gaunt and scarred and hard-eyed; sinewy and taciturn.

They were wild men, of a sort, yet there was still a wide gulf between them and the Cimmerian. They were sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism. He was a barbarian of a thousand generations of barbarians. They had acquired stealth and craft, but he had been born to these things. He excelled them even in lithe economy of motion. They were wolves, but he was a tiger.

Balthus admired them and their leader and felt a pulse of pride that he was admitted into their company. He was proud that his paddle made no more noise

than did theirs. In that respect at least he was their equal, though woodcraft learned in hunts on the Tauran could never equal that ground into the souls of men on the savage border.

Below the fort the river made a wide bend. The lights of the outpost were quickly lost, but the canoe held on its way for nearly a mile, avoiding snags and floating logs with almost uncanny precision.

Then a low grunt from their leader, and they swung its head about and glided toward the opposite shore. Emerging from the black shadows of the brush that fringed the bank and coming into the open of the midstream created a peculiar illusion of rash exposure. But the stars gave little light, and Balthus knew that unless one were watching for it, it would be all but impossible for the keenest eye to make out the shadowy shape of the canoe crossing the river.

They swung in under the overhanging bushes of the western shore and Balthus groped for and found a projecting root which he grasped. No word was spoken. All instructions had been given before the scouting-party left the fort. As silently as a great panther Conan slid over the side and vanished in the bushes. Equally noiseless, nine men followed him. To Balthus, grasping the root with his paddle across his knee, it seemed incredible that ten men should thus fade into the tangled forest without a sound.

He settled himself to wait. No word passed between him and the other man who had been left with him. Somewhere, a mile or so to the northwest, Zogar Sag's village stood girdled with thick woods. Balthus understood his orders; he and his companion were to wait for the return of the raiding-party. If Conan and his men had not returned by the first tinge of dawn, they were to race back up the river to the fort and report that the forest had again taken its immemorial toll of the invading race. The silence was oppressive. No sound came from the black woods, invisible beyond the ebony masses that were the overhanging bushes. Balthus no longer heard the drums. They had been silent for hours. He kept blinking, unconsciously trying to see through the deep gloom. The dank night-smells of the river and the damp forest oppressed him. Somewhere, near by, there was a sound as if a big fish had flopped and splashed the water. Balthus thought it must have leaped so close to the canoe that it had struck the side, for a slight quiver vibrated the craft. The boat's stern began to swing, slightly away from the shore. The man behind him must have let go of the projection he was gripping. Balthus twisted his head to hiss a warning, and could just make out the figure of his companion, a slightly blacker bulk in the blackness.

The man did not reply. Wondering if he had fallen asleep, Balthus reached out and grasped his shoulder. To his amazement, the man crumpled under his touch and slumped down in the canoe. Twisting his body half about, Balthus groped for him, his heart shooting into his throat. His fumbling fingers slid over the man's

throat—only the youth's convulsive clenching of his jaws choked back the cry that rose to his lips. His fingers encountered a gaping, oozing wound—his companion's throat had been cut from ear to ear.

In that instant of horror and panic Balthus started up—and then a muscular arm out of the darkness locked fiercely about his throat, strangling his yell. The canoe rocked wildly. Balthus' knife was in his hand, though he did not remember jerking it out of his boot, and he stabbed fiercely and blindly. He felt the blade sink deep, and a fiendish yell rang in his ear, a yell that was horribly answered. The darkness seemed to come to life about him. A bestial clamor rose on all sides, and other arms grappled him. Borne under a mass of hurtling bodies the canoe rolled sidewise, but before he went under with it, something cracked against Balthus' head and the night was briefly illuminated by a blinding burst of fire before it gave way to a blackness where not even stars shone.

4 The Beasts of Zogar Sag

Fires dazzled Balthus again as he slowly recovered his senses. He blinked, shook his head. Their glare hurt his eyes. A confused medley of sound rose about him, growing more distinct as his senses cleared. He lifted his head and stared stupidly about him. Black figures hemmed him in, etched against crimson tongues of flame.

Memory and understanding came in a rush. He was bound upright to a post in an open space, ringed by fierce and terrible figures. Beyond that ring fires burned, tended by naked, dark-skinned women. Beyond the fires he saw huts of mud and wattle, thatched with brush. Beyond the huts there was a stockade with a broad gate. But he saw these things only incidentally. Even the cryptic dark women with their curious coiffures were noted by him only absently. His full attention was fixed in awful fascination on the men who stood glaring at him.

Short men, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, they were naked except for scanty loin-clouts. The firelight brought out the play of their swelling muscles in bold relief. Their dark faces were immobile, but their narrow eyes glittered with the fire that burns in the eyes of a stalking tiger. Their tangled manes were bound back with bands of copper. Swords and axes were in their hands. Crude bandages banded the limbs of some, and smears of blood were dried on their dark skins. There had been fighting, recent and deadly.

His eyes wavered away from the steady glare of his captors, and he repressed a cry of horror. A few feet away there rose a low, hideous pyramid: it was built of gory human heads. Dead eyes glared glassily up at the black sky. Numbly he recognized the countenances which were turned toward him. They were the heads of the men who had followed Conan into the forest. He could not tell if the Cimmerian's head were among them. Only a few faces were visible to him. It

looked to him as if there must be ten or eleven heads at least. A deadly sickness assailed him. He fought a desire to retch. Beyond the heads lay the bodies of half a dozen Picts, and he was aware of a fierce exultation at the sight. The forest runners had taken toll, at least.

Twisting his head away from the ghastly spectacle, he became aware that another post stood near him—a stake painted black as was the one to which he was bound. A man sagged in his bonds there, naked except for his leathern breeks, whom Balthus recognized as one of Conan's woodsmen. Blood trickled from his mouth, oozed sluggishly from a gash in his side. Lifting his head as he licked his livid lips, he muttered, making himself heard with difficulty above the fiendish clamor of the Picts: 'So they got you, too!'

'Sneaked up in the water and cut the other fellow's throat,' groaned Balthus. 'We never heard them till they were on us. Mitra, how can anything move so silently?'

'They're devils,' mumbled the frontiersman. 'They must have been watching us from the time we left midstream. We walked into a trap. Arrows from all sides were ripping into us before we knew it. Most of us dropped at the first fire. Three or four broke through the bushes and came to hand-grips. But there were too many. Conan might have gotten away. I haven't seen his head. Been better for you and me if they'd killed us outright. I can't blame Conan. Ordinarily we'd have gotten to the village without being discovered. They don't keep spies on the river bank as far down as we landed. We must have stumbled into a big party coming up the river from the south. Some devilment is up. Too many Picts here. These aren't all Gwaweli; men from the western tribes here and from up and down the river.'

Balthus stared at the ferocious shapes. Little as he knew of Pictish ways, he was aware that the number of men clustered about them was out of proportion to the size of the village. There were not enough huts to have accommodated them all. Then he noticed that there was a difference in the barbaric tribal designs painted on their faces and breasts.

'Some kind of devilment,' muttered the forest runner. 'They might have gathered here to watch Zogar's magic-making. He'll make some rare magic with our carcasses. Well, a border-man doesn't expect to die in bed. But I wish we'd gone out along with the rest.'

The wolfish howling of the Picts rose in volume and exultation, and from a movement in their ranks, an eager surging and crowding, Balthus deduced that someone of importance was coming. Twisting his head about, he saw that the stakes were set before a long building, larger than the other huts, decorated by human skulls dangling from the eaves. Through the door of that structure now danced a fantastic figure.

'Zogar!' muttered the woodsman, his bloody countenance set in wolfish lines as he unconsciously strained at his cords. Balthus saw a lean figure of middle height, almost hidden in ostrich plumes set on a harness of leather and copper. From amidst the plumes peered a hideous and malevolent face. The plumes puzzled Balthus. He knew their source lay half the width of a world to the south. They fluttered and rustled evilly as the shaman leaped and cavorted.

With fantastic bounds and prancings he entered the ring and whirled before his bound and silent captives. With another man it would have seemed ridiculous—a foolish savage prancing meaninglessly in a whirl of feathers. But that ferocious face glaring out from the billowing mass gave the scene a grim significance. No man with a face like that could seem ridiculous or like anything except the devil he was.

Suddenly he froze to statuesque stillness; the plumes rippled once and sank about him. The howling warriors fell silent. Zogar Sag stood erect and motionless, and he seemed to increase in height—to grow and expand. Balthus experienced the illusion that the Pict was towering above him, staring contemptuously down from a great height, though he knew the shaman was not as tall as himself. He shook off the illusion with difficulty.

The shaman was talking now, a harsh, guttural intonation that yet carried the hiss of a cobra. He thrust his head on his long neck toward the wounded man on the stake; his eyes shone red as blood in the firelight. The frontiersman spat full in his face.

With a fiendish howl Zogar bounded convulsively into the air, and the warriors gave tongue to a yell that shuddered up to the stars. They rushed toward the man on the stake, but the shaman beat them back. A snarled command sent men running to the gate. They hurled it open, turned and raced back to the circle. The ring of men split, divided with desperate haste to right and left. Balthus saw the women and naked children scurrying to the huts. They peeked out of doors and windows. A broad lane was left to the open gate, beyond which loomed the black forest, crowding sullenly in upon the clearing, unlighted by the fires.

A tense silence reigned as Zogar Sag turned toward the forest, raised on his tiptoes and sent a weird inhuman call shuddering out into the night. Somewhere, far out in the black forest, a deeper cry answered him. Balthus shuddered. From the timbre of that cry he knew it never came from a human throat. He remembered what Valannus had said—that Zogar boasted that he could summon wild beasts to do his bidding. The woodsman was livid beneath his mask of blood. He licked his lips spasmodically.

The village held its breath. Zogar Sag stood still as a statue, his plumes trembling faintly about him. But suddenly the gate was no longer empty.

A shuddering gasp swept over the village and men crowded hastily back,

jamming one another between the huts. Balthus felt the short hair stir on his scalp. The creature that stood in the gate was like the embodiment of nightmare legend. Its color was of a curious pale quality which made it seem ghostly and unreal in the dim light. But there was nothing unreal about the low-hung savage head, and the great curved fangs that glistened in the firelight. On noiseless padded feet it approached like a phantom out of the past. It was a survival of an older, grimmer age, the ogre of many an ancient legend—a saber-tooth tiger. No Hyborian hunter had looked upon one of those primordial brutes for centuries. Immemorial myths lent the creatures a supernatural quality, induced by their ghostly color and their fiendish ferocity.

The beast that glided toward the men on the stakes was longer and heavier than a common, striped tiger, almost as bulky as a bear. Its shoulders and forelegs were so massive and mightily muscled as to give it a curiously top-heavy look, though its hind-quarters were more powerful than that of a lion. Its jaws were massive, but its head was brutishly shaped. Its brain capacity was small. It had room for no instincts except those of destruction. It was a freak of carnivorous development, evolution run amuck in a horror of fangs and talons.

This was the monstrosity Zogar Sag had summoned out of the forest. Balthus no longer doubted the actuality of the shaman's magic. Only the black arts could establish a domination over that tiny-brained, mighty-thewed monster. Like a whisper at the back of his consciousness rose the vague memory of the name of an ancient god of darkness and primordial fear, to whom once both men and beasts bowed and whose children—men whispered—still lurked in dark corners of the world. New horror tinged the glare he fixed on Zogar Sag.

The monster moved past the heap of bodies and the pile of gory heads without appearing to notice them. He was no scavenger. He hunted only the living, in a life dedicated solely to slaughter. An awful hunger burned greenly in the wide, unwinking eyes; the hunger not alone of belly-emptiness, but the lust of death-dealing. His gaping jaws slavered. The shaman stepped back; his hand waved toward the woodsman.

The great cat sank into a crouch, and Balthus numbly remembered tales of its appalling ferocity: of how it would spring upon an elephant and drive its sword-like fangs so deeply into the titan's skull that they could never be withdrawn, but would keep it nailed to its victim, to die by starvation. The shaman cried out shrilly, and with an ear-shattering roar the monster sprang.

Balthus had never dreamed of such a spring, such a hurtling of incarnated destruction embodied in that giant bulk of iron thews and ripping talons. Full on the woodsman's breast it struck, and the stake splintered and snapped at the base, crashing to the earth under the impact. Then the saber-tooth was gliding toward the gate, half dragging, half carrying a hideous crimson hulk that only faintly re-

sembled a man. Balthus glared almost paralysed, his brain refusing to credit what his eyes had seen.

In that leap the great beast had not only broken off the stake, it had ripped the mangled body of its victim from the post to which it was bound. The huge talons in that instant of contact had disemboweled and partially dismembered the man, and the giant fangs had torn away the whole top of his head, shearing through the skull as easily as through flesh. Stout rawhide thongs had given way like paper; where the thongs had held, flesh and bones had not. Balthus retched suddenly. He had hunted bears and panthers, but he had never dreamed the beast lived which could make such a red ruin of a human frame in the flicker of an instant.

The saber-tooth vanished through the gate, and a few moments later a deep roar sounded through the forest, receding in the distance. But the Picts still shrank back against the huts, and the shaman still stood facing the gate that was like a black opening to let in the night.

Cold sweat burst suddenly out on Balthus' skin. What new horror would come through that gate to make carrion-meat of his body? Sick panic assailed him and he strained futilely at his thongs. The night pressed in very black and horrible outside the firelight. The fires themselves glowed lurid as the fires of hell. He felt the eyes of the Picts upon him—hundreds of hungry, cruel eyes that reflected the lust of souls utterly without humanity as he knew it. They no longer seemed men; they were devils of this black jungle, as inhuman as the creatures to which the fiend in the nodding plumes screamed through the darkness.

Zogar sent another call shuddering through the night, and it was utterly unlike the first cry. There was a hideous sibilance in it—Balthus turned cold at the implication. If a serpent could hiss that loud, it would make just such a sound.

This time there was no answer—only a period of breathless silence in which the pound of Balthus' heart strangled him; and then there sounded a swishing outside the gate, a dry rustling that sent chills down Balthus' spine. Again the firelit gate held a hideous occupant.

Again Balthus recognized the monster from ancient legends. He saw and knew the ancient and evil serpent which swayed there, its wedge-shaped head, huge as that of a horse, as high as a tall man's head, and its palely gleaming barrel rippling out behind it. A forked tongue darted in and out, and the firelight glittered on bared fangs.

Balthus became incapable of emotion. The horror of his fate paralysed him. That was the reptile that the ancients called Ghost Snake, the pale, abominable terror that of old glided into huts by night to devour whole families. Like the python it crushed its victim, but unlike other constrictors its fangs bore venom that carried madness and death. It too had long been considered extinct. But Valannus

had spoken truly. No white man knew what shapes haunted the great forests beyond Black River.

It came on silently rippling over the ground, its hideous head on the same level, its neck curving back slightly for the stroke. Balthus gazed with glazed, hypnotized stare into that loathesome gullet down which he would soon be engulfed, and he was aware of no sensation except a vague nausea.

And then something that glinted in the firelight streaked from the shadows of the huts, and the great reptile whipped about and went into instant convulsions. As in a dream Balthus saw a short throwing-spear transfixing the mighty neck, just below the gaping jaws; the shaft protruded from one side, the steel head from the other.

Knotting and looping hideously, the maddened reptile rolled into the circle of men who strove back from him. The spear had not severed its spine, but merely transfixed its great neck muscles. Its furiously lashing tail mowed down a dozen men and its jaws snapped convulsively, splashing others with venom that burned like liquid fire. Howling, cursing, screaming, frantic, they scattered before it, knocking each other down in their flight, trampling the fallen, bursting through the huts. The giant snake rolled into a fire, scattering sparks and brands, and the pain lashed it to more frenzied efforts. A hut wall buckled under the ram-like impact of its flailing tail, disgorging howling people.

Men stampeded through the fires, knocking the logs right and left. The flames sprang up, then sank. A reddish dim glow was all that lighted that nightmare scene where the giant reptile whipped and rolled, and men clawed and shrieked in frantic flight.

Balthus felt something jerk at his wrists, and then, miraculously, he was free, and a strong hand dragged him behind the post. Dazedly he saw Conan, felt the forest man's iron grip on his arm.

There was blood on the Cimmerian's mail, dried blood on the sword in his right hand; he loomed dim and gigantic in the shadowy light.

'Come on! Before they get over their panic!'

Balthus felt the haft of an ax shoved into his hand. Zogar Sag had disappeared. Conan dragged Balthus after him until the youth's numb brain awoke, and his legs began to move of their own accord. Then Conan released him and ran into the building where the skulls hung. Balthus followed him. He got a glimpse of a grim stone altar, faintly lighted by the glow outside; five human heads grinned on that altar, and there was a grisly familiarity about the features of the freshest; it was the head of the merchant Tiberias. Behind the altar was an idol, dim, indistinct, bestial, yet vaguely man-like in outline. Then fresh horror choked Balthus as the shape heaved up suddenly with a rattle of chains, lifting long misshapen arms in the gloom.

Conan's sword flailed down, crunching through flesh and bone, and then the Cimmerian was dragging Balthus around the altar, past a huddled shaggy bulk on the floor, to a door at the back of the long hut. Through this they burst, out into the enclosure again. But a few yards beyond them loomed the stockade.

It was dark behind the altar-hut. The mad stampede of the Picts had not carried them in that direction. At the wall Conan halted, gripped Balthus and heaved him at arm's length into the air as he might have lifted a child. Balthus grasped the points of the upright logs set in the sun-dried mud and scrambled up on them, ignoring the havoc done his skin. He lowered a hand to the Cimmerian, when around a corner of the altar-hut sprang a fleeing Pict. He halted short, glimpsing the man on the wall in the faint glow of the fires. Conan hurled his ax with deadly aim, but the warrior's mouth was already open for a yell of warning, and it rang loud above the din, cut short as he dropped with a shattered skull.

Blinding terror had not submerged all ingrained instincts. As that wild yell rose above the clamor, there was an instant's lull, and then a hundred throats bayed ferocious answer and warriors came leaping to repel the attack presaged by the warning.

Conan leaped high, caught, not Balthus' hand but his arm near the shoulder, and swung himself up. Balthus set his teeth against the strain, and then the Cimmerian was on the wall beside him, and the fugitives dropped down on the other side.

5 The Children of Jhebbal Sag

'Which way is the river?' Balthus was confused.

'We don't dare try for the river now,' grunted Conan. 'The woods between the village and the river are swarming with warriors. Come on! We'll head in the last direction they'll expect us to go—west!'

Looking back as they entered the thick growth, Balthus beheld the wall dotted with black heads as the savages peered over. The Picts were bewildered. They had not gained the wall in time to see the fugitives take cover. They had rushed to the wall expecting to repel an attack in force. They had seen the body of the dead warrior. But no enemy was in sight.

Balthus realized that they did not yet know their prisoner had escaped. From other sounds he believed that the warriors, directed by the shrill voice of Zogar Sag, were destroying the wounded serpent with arrows. The monster was out of the shaman's control. A moment later the quality of the yells was altered. Screeches of rage rose in the night.

Conan laughed grimly. He was leading Balthus along a narrow trail that ran west under the black branches, stepping as swiftly and surely as if he trod a well-lighted thoroughfare. Balthus stumbled after him, guiding himself by feeling the

dense wall on either hand.

'They'll be after us now. Zogar's discovered you're gone, and he knows my head wasn't in the pile before the altar-hut. The dog! If I'd had another spear I'd have thrown it through him before I struck the snake. Keep to the trail. They can't track us by torchlight, and there are a score of paths leading from the village. They'll follow those leading to the river first—throw a cordon of warriors for miles along the bank, expecting us to try to break through. We won't take to the woods until we have to. We can make better time on this trail. Now buckle down to it and run as you never ran before.'

'They got over their panic cursed quick!' panted Balthus, complying with a fresh burst of speed.

'They're not afraid of anything, very long,' grunted Conan.

For a space nothing was said between them. The fugitives devoted all their attention to covering distance. They were plunging deeper and deeper into the wilderness and getting farther away from civilization at every step, but Balthus did not question Conan's wisdom. The Cimmerian presently took time to grunt: 'When we're far enough away from the village we'll swing back to the river in a big circle. No other village within miles of Gwawela. All the Picts are gathered in that vicinity. We'll circle wide around them. They can't track us until daylight. They'll pick up our path then, but before dawn we'll leave the trail and take to the woods.'

They plunged on. The yells died out behind them. Balthus' breath was whistling through his teeth. He felt a pain in his side, and running became torture. He blundered against the bushes on each side of the trail. Conan pulled up suddenly, turned and stared back down the dim path.

Somewhere the moon was rising, a dim white glow amidst a tangle of branches.

'Shall we take to the woods?' panted Balthus.

'Give me your ax,' murmured Conan softly. 'Something is close behind us.'

'Then we'd better leave the trail!' exclaimed Balthus.

Conan shook his head and drew his companion into a dense thicket. The moon rose higher, making a dim light in the path.

'We can't fight the whole tribe!' whispered Balthus.

'No human being could have found our trail so quickly, or followed us so swiftly,' muttered Conan. 'Keep silent.'

There followed a tense silence in which Balthus felt that his heart could be heard pounding for miles away. Then abruptly, without a sound to announce its coming, a savage head appeared in the dim path. Balthus' heart jumped into his throat; at first glance he feared to look upon the awful head of the saber-tooth. But

this head was smaller, more narrow; it was a leopard which stood there, snarling silently and glaring down the trail. What wind there was was blowing toward the hiding men, concealing their scent. The beast lowered his head and snuffed the trail, then moved forward uncertainly. A chill played down Balthus' spine. The brute was undoubtedly trailing them.

And it was suspicious. It lifted its head, its eyes glowing like balls of fire, and growled low in its throat. And at that instant Conan hurled the ax.

All the weight of arm and shoulder was behind the throw, and the ax was a streak of silver in the dim moon. Almost before he realized what had happened, Balthus saw the leopard rolling on the ground in its death-throes, the handle of the ax standing up from its head. The head of the weapon had split its narrow skull.

Conan bounded from the bushes, wrenched his ax free and dragged the limp body in among the trees, concealing it from the casual glance.

'Now let's go, and go fast!' he grunted, leading the way southward, away from the trail. 'There'll be warriors coming after that cat. As soon as he got his wits back Zogar sent him after us. The Picts would follow him, but he'd leave them far behind. He'd circle the village until he hit our trail and then come after us like a streak. They couldn't keep up with him, but they'll have an idea as to our general direction. They'd follow, listening for his cry. Well, they won't hear that, but they'll find the blood on the trail, and look around and find the body in the brush. They'll pick up our spoor there, if they can. Walk with care.'

He avoided clinging briars and low-hanging branches effortlessly, gliding between trees without touching the stems and always planting his feet in the places calculated to show least evidence of his passing; but with Balthus it was slower, more laborious work.

No sound came from behind them. They had covered more than a mile when Balthus said: 'Does Zogar Sag catch leopard-cubs and train them for bloodhounds?'

Conan shook his head. 'That was a leopard he called out of the woods.'

'But,' Balthus persisted, 'if he can order the beasts to do his bidding, why doesn't he rouse them all and have them after us? The forest is full of leopards; why send only one after us?'

Conan did not reply for a space, and when he did it was with a curious reticence.

'He can't command all the animals. Only such as remember Jhebbal Sag.'

'Jhebbal Sag?' Balthus repeated the ancient name hesitantly. He had never heard it spoken more than three or four times in his whole life.

'Once all living things worshipped him. That was long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language. Men have forgotten him; even the beasts forget. Only a few remember. The men who remember Jhebbal Sag and the beasts who

remember are brothers and speak the same tongue.'

Balthus did not reply; he had strained at a Pictish stake and seen the nighted jungle give up its fanged horrors at a shaman's call.

'Civilized men laugh,' said Conan. 'But not one can tell me how Zogar Sag can call pythons and tigers and leopards out of the wilderness and make them do his bidding. They would say it is a lie, if they dared. That's the way with civilized men. When they can't explain something by their half-baked science, they refuse to believe it.'

The people on the Tauran were closer to the primitive than most Aquilonians; superstitions persisted, whose sources were lost in antiquity. And Balthus had seen that which still prickled his flesh. He could not refute the monstrous thing which Conan's words implied.

'I've heard that there's an ancient grove sacred to Jhebbal Sag somewhere in this forest,' said Conan. 'I don't know. I've never seen it. But more beasts *remember* in this country than any I've ever seen.'

'Then others will be on our trail?'

'They are now,' was Conan's disquieting answer. 'Zogar would never leave our tracking to one beast alone.'

'What are we to do, then?' asked Balthus uneasily, grasping his ax as he stared at the gloomy arches above him. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of ripping talons and fangs leaping from the shadows.

'Wait!'

Conan turned, squatted and with his knife began scratching a curious symbol in the mold. Stooping to look at it over his shoulder, Balthus felt a crawling of the flesh along his spine, he knew not why. He felt no wind against his face, but there was a rustling of leaves above them and a weird moaning swept ghostily through the branches. Conan glanced up inscrutably, then rose and stood staring somberly down at the symbol he had drawn.

'What is it?' whispered Balthus. It looked archaic and meaningless to him. He supposed that it was his ignorance of artistry which prevented his identifying it as one of the conventional designs of some prevailing culture. But had he been the most erudite artist in the world, he would have been no nearer the solution.

'I saw it carved in the rock of a cave no human had visited for a million years,' muttered Conan, 'in the uninhabited mountains beyond the Sea of Vilayet, half a world away from this spot. Later I saw a black witch-finder of Kush scratch it in the sand of a nameless river. He told me part of its meaning—it's sacred to Jhebbal Sag and the creatures which worship him. Watch!'

They drew back among the dense foliage some yards away and waited in tense silence. To the east drums muttered and somewhere to north and west other

drums answered. Balthus shivered, though he knew long miles of black forest separated him from the grim beaters of those drums whose dull pulsing was a sinister overture that set the dark stage for bloody drama.

Balthus found himself holding his breath. Then with a slight shaking of the leaves, the bushes parted and a magnificent panther came into view. The moonlight dappling through the leaves shone on its glossy coat rippling with the play of the great muscles beneath it.

With its head held low it glided toward them. It was smelling out their trail. Then it halted as if frozen, its muzzle almost touching the symbol cut in the mold. For a long space it crouched motionless; it flattened its long body and laid its head on the ground before the mark. And Balthus felt the short hairs stir on his scalp. For the attitude of the great carnivore was one of awe and adoration.

Then the panther rose and backed away carefully, belly almost to the ground. With his hind-quarters among the bushes he wheeled as if in sudden panic and was gone like a flash of dappled light.

Balthus mopped his brow with a trembling hand and glanced at Conan.

The barbarian's eyes were smoldering with fires that never lit the eyes of men bred to the ideas of civilization. In that instant he was all wild, and had forgotten the man at his side. In his burning gaze Balthus glimpsed and vaguely recognized pristine images and half-embodied memories, shadows from Life's dawn, forgotten and repudiated by sophisticated races—ancient, primeval fantasms unnamed and nameless.

Then the deeper fires were masked and Conan was silently leading the way deeper into the forest.

'We've no more to fear from the beasts,' he said after a while, 'but we've left a sign for men to read. They won't follow our trail very easily, and until they find that symbol they won't know for sure we've turned south. Even then it won't be easy to smell us out without the beasts to aid them. But the woods south of the trail will be full of warriors looking for us. If we keep moving after daylight, we'll be sure to run into some of them. As soon as we find a good place we'll hide and wait until another night to swing back and make the river. We've got to warn Valannus, but it won't help him any if we get ourselves killed.'

'Warn Valannus?'

'Hell, the woods along the river are swarming with Picts! That's why they got us. Zogar's brewing war-magic; no mere raid this time. He's done something no Pict has done in my memory—united as many as fifteen or sixteen clans. His magic did it; they'll follow a wizard farther than they will a war-chief. You saw the mob in the village; and there were hundreds hiding along the river bank that you didn't see. More coming, from the farther villages. He'll have at least three thousand fighting-men. I lay in the bushes and heard their talk as they went past. They

mean to attack the fort; when, I don't know, but Zogar doesn't dare delay long. He's gathered them and whipped them into a frenzy. If he doesn't lead them into battle quickly, they'll fall to quarreling with one another. They're like blood-mad tigers.

'I don't know whether they can take the fort or not. Anyway, we've got to get back across the river and give the warning. The settlers on the Velitrium road must either get into the fort or back to Velitrium. While the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will range the road far to the east—might even cross Thunder River and raid the thickly settled country behind Velitrium.'

As he talked he was leading the way deeper and deeper into the ancient wilderness. Presently he grunted with satisfaction. They had reached a spot where the underbrush was more scattered, and an outcropping of stone was visible, wandering off southward. Balthus felt more secure as they followed it. Not even a Pict could trail them over naked rock.

'How did you get away?' he asked presently.

Conan tapped his mail-shirt and helmet.

'If more borderers would wear harness there'd be fewer skulls hanging on the altar-huts. But most men make noise if they wear armor. They were waiting on each side of the path, without moving. And when a Pict stands motionless, the very beasts of the forest pass him without seeing him. They'd seen us crossing the river and got in their places. If they'd gone into ambush after we left the bank, I'd have had some hint of it. But they were waiting, and not even a leaf trembled. The devil himself couldn't have suspected anything. The first suspicion I had was when I heard a shaft rasp against a bow as it was pulled back. I dropped and yelled for the men behind me to drop, but they were too slow, taken by surprise like that.

'Most of them fell at the first volley that raked us from both sides. Some of the arrows crossed the trail and struck Picts on the other side. I heard them howl.' He grinned with vicious satisfaction. 'Such of us as were left plunged into the woods and closed with them. When I saw the others were all down or taken, I broke through and outfooted the painted devils through the darkness. They were all around me. I ran and crawled and sneaked, and sometimes I lay on my belly under the bushes while they passed me on all sides.

'I tried for the shore and found it lined with them, waiting for just such a move. But I'd have cut my way through and taken a chance on swimming, only I heard the drums pounding in the village and knew they'd taken somebody alive.

'They were all so engrossed in Zogar's magic that I was able to climb the wall behind the altar-hut. There was a warrior supposed to be watching at that point, but he was squatting behind the hut and peering around the corner at the ceremony. I came up behind him and broke his neck with my hands before he knew what was happening. It was his spear I threw into the snake, and that's his ax

you're carrying.'

'But what was that—that thing you killed in the altar-hut?' asked Balthus, with a shiver at the memory of the dim-seen horror.

'One of Zogar's gods. One of Jhebbal's children that didn't remember and had to be kept chained to the altar. A bull ape. The Picts think they're sacred to the Hairy One who lives on the moon—the gorilla-god of Gullah.

'It's getting light. Here's a good place to hide until we see how close they're on our trail. Probably have to wait until night to break back to the river.'

A low hill pitched upward, girdled and covered with thick trees and bushes. Near the crest Conan slid into a tangle of jutting rocks, crowned by dense bushes. Lying among them they could see the jungle below without being seen. It was a good place to hide or defend. Balthus did not believe that even a Pict could have trailed them over the rocky ground for the past four or five miles, but he was afraid of the beasts that obeyed Zogar Sag. His faith in the curious symbol wavered a little now. But Conan had dismissed the possibility of beasts tracking them.

A ghostly whiteness spread through the dense branches; the patches of sky visible altered in hue, grew from pink to blue. Balthus felt the gnawing of hunger, though he had slaked his thirst at a stream they had skirted. There was complete silence, except for an occasional chirp of a bird. The drums were no longer to be heard. Balthus' thoughts reverted to the grim scene before the altar-hut.

'Those were ostrich plumes Zogar Sag wore,' he said. 'I've seen them on the helmets of knights who rode from the East to visit the barons of the marches. There are no ostriches in this forest, are there?'

'They came from Kush,' answered Conan. 'West of here, many marches, lies the seashore. Ships from Zingara occasionally come and trade weapons and ornaments and wine to the coastal tribes for skins and copper ore and gold dust. Sometimes they trade ostrich plumes they got from the Stygians, who in turn got them from the black tribes of Kush, which lies south of Stygia. The Pictish shamans place great store by them. But there's much risk in such trade. The Picts are too likely to try to seize the ship. And the coast is dangerous to ships. I've sailed along it when I was with the pirates of the Barachan Isles, which lie southwest of Zingara.'

Balthus looked at his companion with admiration.

'I knew you hadn't spent your life on this frontier. You've mentioned several far places. You've traveled widely?'

'I've roamed far; farther than any other man of my race ever wandered. I've seen all the great cities of the Hyborians, the Shemites, the Stygians and the Hyrkanians. I've roamed in the unknown countries south of the black kingdoms of Kush, and east of the Sea of Vilayet. I've been a mercenary captain, a corsair, a _kozak_, a penniless vagabond, a general—hell, I've been everything except a king, and I may be that, before I die.' The fancy pleased him, and he grinned

hardly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and stretched his mighty figure on the rocks. 'This is as good life as any. I don't know how long I'll stay on the frontier; a week, a month, a year. I have a roving foot. But it's as well on the border as anywhere.'

Balthus set himself to watch the forest below them. Momentarily he expected to see fierce painted faces thrust through the leaves. But as the hours passed no stealthy footfall disturbed the brooding quiet. Balthus believed the Picts had missed their trail and given up the chase. Conan grew restless.

'We should have sighted parties scouring the woods for us. If they've quit the chase, it's because they're after bigger game. They may be gathering to cross the river and storm the fort.'

'Would they come this far south if they lost the trail?'

'They've lost the trail, all right; otherwise they'd have been on our necks before now. Under ordinary circumstances they'd scour the woods for miles in every direction. Some of them should have passed within sight of this hill. They must be preparing to cross the river. We've got to take a chance and make for the river.'

Creeping down the rocks Balthus felt his flesh crawl between his shoulders as he momentarily expected a withering blast of arrows from the green masses about them. He feared that the Picts had discovered them and were lying about in ambush. But Conan was convinced no enemies were near, and the Cimmerian was right.

'We're miles to the south of the village,' grunted Conan. 'We'll hit straight through for the river. I don't know how far down the river they've spread. We'll hope to hit it below them.'

With haste that seemed reckless to Balthus they hurried eastward. The woods seemed empty of life. Conan believed that all the Picts were gathered in the vicinity of Gwawela, if indeed, they had not already crossed the river. He did not believe they would cross in the daytime, however.

'Some woodsman would be sure to see them and give the alarm. They'll cross above and below the fort, out of sight of the sentries. Then others will get in canoes and make straight across for the river wall. As soon as they attack, those hidden in the woods on the east shore will assail the fort from the other sides. They've tried that before, and got the guts shot and hacked out of them. But this time they've got enough men to make a real onslaught of it.'

They pushed on without pausing, though Balthus gazed longingly at the squirrels flitting among the branches, which he could have brought down with a cast of his ax. With a sigh he drew up his broad belt. The everlasting silence and gloom of the primitive forest was beginning to depress him. He found himself thinking of the open groves and sun-dappled meadows of the Tauran, of the bluff

cheer of his father's steep-thatched, diamond-paned house, of the fat cows browsing through the deep, lush grass, and the hearty fellowship of the brawny, bare-armed plowmen and herdsmen.

He felt lonely, in spite of his companion. Conan was as much a part of this wilderness as Balthus was alien to it. The Cimmerian might have spent years among the great cities of the world; he might have walked with the rulers of civilization; he might even achieve his wild whim some day and rule as king of a civilized nation; stranger things had happened. But he was no less a barbarian. He was concerned only with the naked fundamentals of life. The warm intimacies of small, kindly things, the sentiments and delicious trivialities that make up so much of civilized men's lives were meaningless to him. A wolf was no less a wolf because a whim of chance caused him to run with the watchdogs. Bloodshed and violence and savagery were the natural elements of the life Conan knew; he could not, and would never, understand the little things that are so dear to civilized men and women.

The shadows were lengthening when they reached the river and peered through the masking bushes. They could see up and down the river for about a mile each way. The sullen stream lay bare and empty. Conan scowled across at the other shore.

'We've got to take another chance here. We've got to swim the river. We don't know whether they've crossed or not. The woods over there may be alive with them. We've got to risk it. We're about six miles south of Gwawela.'

He wheeled and ducked as a bow-string twanged. Something like a white flash of light streaked through the bushes. Balthus knew it was an arrow. Then with a tigerish bound Conan was through the bushes. Balthus caught the gleam of steel as he whirled his sword, and heard a death scream. The next instant he had broken through the bushes after the Cimmerian.

A Pict with a shattered skull lay face-down on the ground, his fingers spasmodically clawing at the grass. Half a dozen others were swarming about Conan, swords and axes lifted. They had cast away their bows, useless at such deadly close quarters. Their lower jaws were painted white, contrasting vividly with their dark faces, and the designs on their muscular breasts differed from any Balthus had ever seen.

One of them hurled his ax at Balthus and rushed after it with lifted knife. Balthus ducked and then caught the wrist that drove the knife licking at his throat. They went to the ground together, rolling over and over. The Pict was like a wild beast, his muscles hard as steel strings.

Balthus was striving to maintain his hold on the wild man's wrist and bring his own ax into play, but so fast and furious was the struggle that each attempt to strike was blocked. The Pict was wrenching furiously to free his knife hand, was

clutching at Balthus' ax, and driving his knees at the youth's groin. Suddenly he attempted to shift his knife to his free hand, and in that instant Balthus, struggling up on one knee, split the painted head with a desperate blow of his ax.

He sprang up and glared wildly about for his companion, expecting to see him overwhelmed by numbers. Then he realized the full strength and ferocity of the Cimmerian. Conan bestrode two of his attackers, shorn half asunder by that terrible broadsword. As Balthus looked he saw the Cimmerian beat down a thrusting shortsword, avoid the stroke of an ax with a cat-like sidewise spring which brought him within arm's length of a squat savage stooping for a bow. Before the Pict could straighten, the red sword flailed down and clove him from shoulder to mid-breastbone, where the blade stuck. The remaining warriors rushed in, one from either side. Balthus hurled his ax with an accuracy that reduced the attackers to one, and Conan, abandoning his efforts to free his sword, wheeled and met the remaining Pict with his bare hands. The stocky warrior, a head shorter than his tall enemy, leaped in, striking with his ax, at the same time stabbing murderously with his knife. The knife broke on the Cimmerian's mail, and the ax checked in midair as Conan's fingers locked like iron on the descending arm. A bone snapped loudly, and Balthus saw the Pict wince and falter. The next instant he was swept off his feet, lifted high above the Cimmerian's head—he writhed in midair for an instant, kicking and thrashing, and then was dashed headlong to the earth with such force that he rebounded, and then lay still, his limp posture telling of splintered limbs and a broken spine.

'Come on!' Conan wrenched his sword free and snatched up an ax. 'Grab a bow and a handful of arrows, and hurry! We've got to trust to our heels again. That yell was heard. They'll be here in no time. If we tried to swim now, they'd feather us with arrows before we reached midstream!'

6 Red Axes of the Border

Conan did not plunge deeply into the forest. A few hundred yards from the river, he altered his slanting course and ran parallel with it. Balthus recognized a grim determination not to be hunted away from the river which they must cross if they were to warn the men in the fort. Behind them rose more loudly the yells of the forest men. Balthus believed the Picts had reached the glade where the bodies of the slain men lay. Then further yells seemed to indicate that the savages were streaming into the woods in pursuit. They had left a trail any Pict could follow.

Conan increased his speed, and Balthus grimly set his teeth and kept on his heels, though he felt he might collapse any time. It seemed centuries since he had eaten last. He kept going more by an effort of will than anything else. His blood was pounding so furiously in his eardrums that he was not aware when the yells

died out behind them.

Conan halted suddenly. Balthus leaned against a tree and panted.

'They've quit!' grunted the Cimmerian, scowling.

'Sneaking—up—on—us!' gasped Balthus.

Conan shook his head.

'A short chase like this they'd yell every step of the way. No. They've gone back. I thought I heard somebody yelling behind them a few seconds before the noise began to get dimmer. They've been recalled. And that's good for us, but damned bad for the men in the fort. It means the warriors are being summoned out of the woods for the attack. These men we ran into were warriors from a tribe down the river. They were undoubtedly headed for Gwawela to join in the assault on the fort. Damn it, we're farther away than ever, now. We've got to get across the river.'

Turning east he hurried through the thickets with no attempt at concealment. Balthus followed him, for the first time feeling the sting of lacerations on his breast and shoulder where the Pict's savage teeth had scored him. He was pushing through the thick bushes that fringed the bank when Conan pulled him back. Then he heard a rhythmic splashing, and peering through the leaves, saw a dugout canoe coming up the river, its single occupant paddling hard against the current. He was a strongly built Pict with a white heron feather thrust in a copper band that confined his square-cut mane.

'That's a Gwawela man,' muttered Conan. 'Emissary from Zogar. White plume shows that. He's carried a peace talk to the tribes down the river and now he's trying to get back and take a hand in the slaughter.'

The lone ambassador was now almost even with their hiding-place, and suddenly Balthus almost jumped out of his skin. At his very ear had sounded the harsh gutturals of a Pict. Then he realized that Conan had called to the paddler in his own tongue. The man started, scanned the bushes and called back something, then cast a startled glance across the river, bent low and sent the canoe shooting in toward the western bank. Not understanding, Balthus saw Conan take from his hand the bow he had picked up in the glade, and notch an arrow.

The Pict had run his canoe in close to the shore, and staring up into the bushes, called out something. His answer came in the twang of the bow-string, the streaking flight of the arrow that sank to the feathers in his broad breast. With a choking gasp he slumped sidewise and rolled into the shallow water. In an instant Conan was down the bank and wading into the water to grasp the drifting canoe. Balthus stumbled after him and somewhat dazedly crawled into the canoe. Conan scrambled in, seized the paddle and sent the craft shooting toward the eastern shore. Balthus noted with envious admiration the play of the great muscles beneath the sun-burnt skin. The Cimmerian seemed an iron man, who never knew

fatigue.

'What did you say to the Pict?' asked Balthus.

'Told him to pull into shore; said there was a white forest runner on the bank who was trying to get a shot at him.'

'That doesn't seem fair,' Balthus objected. 'He thought a friend was speaking to him. You mimicked a Pict perfectly—'

'We needed his boat,' grunted Conan, not pausing in his exertions. 'Only way to lure him to the bank. Which is worse—to betray a Pict who'd enjoy skinning us both alive, or betray the men across the river whose lives depend on our getting over?'

Balthus mulled over this delicate ethical question for a moment, then shrugged his shoulder and asked: 'How far are we from the fort?'

Conan pointed to a creek which flowed into Black River from the east, a few hundred yards below them.

'That's South Creek; it's ten miles from its mouth to the fort. It's the southern boundary of Conajohara. Marshes miles wide south of it. No danger of a raid from across them. Nine miles above the fort North Creek forms the other boundary. Marshes beyond that, too. That's why an attack must come from the west, across Black River. Conajohara's just like a spear, with a point nineteen miles wide, thrust into the Pictish wilderness.'

'Why don't we keep to the canoe and make the trip by water?'

'Because, considering the current we've got to brace, and the bends in the river, we can go faster afoot. Besides, remember Gwawela is south of the fort; if the Picts are crossing the river we'd run right into them.'

* * * * *

Dusk was gathering as they stepped upon the eastern bank. Without pause Conan pushed on northward, at a pace that made Balthus' sturdy legs ache.

'Valannus wanted a fort built at the mouths of North and South Creeks,' grunted the Cimmerian. 'Then the river could be patrolled constantly. But the Government wouldn't do it.

'Soft-bellied fools sitting on velvet cushions with naked girls offering them iced wine on their knees—I know the breed. They can't see any farther than their palace wall. Diplomacy—hell! They'd fight Picts with theories of territorial expansion. Valannus and men like him have to obey the orders of a set of damned fools. They'll never grab any more Pictish land, any more than they'll ever rebuild Venarium. The time may come when they'll see the barbarians swarming over the walls of the Eastern cities!'

A week before, Balthus would have laughed at any such preposterous suggestion. Now he made no reply. He had seen the unconquerable ferocity of the

men who dwelt beyond the frontiers.

He shivered, casting glances at the sullen river, just visible through the bushes, at the arches of the trees which crowded close to its banks. He kept remembering that the Picts might have crossed the river and be lying in ambush between them and the fort. It was fast growing dark.

A slight sound ahead of them jumped his heart into his throat, and Conan's sword gleamed in the air. He lowered it when a dog, a great, gaunt, scarred beast, slunk out of the bushes and stood staring at them.

'That dog belonged to a settler who tried to build his cabin on the bank of the river a few miles south of the fort,' grunted Conan. 'The Picts slipped over and killed him, of course, and burned his cabin. We found him dead among the embers, and the dog lying senseless among three Picts he'd killed. He was almost cut to pieces. We took him to the fort and dressed his wounds, but after he recovered he took to the woods and turned wild—What now, Slasher, are you hunting the men who killed your master?'

The massive head swung from side to side and the eyes glowed greenly. He did not growl or bark. Silently as a phantom he slid in behind them.

'Let him come,' muttered Conan. 'He can smell the devils before we can see them.'

Balthus smiled and laid his hand caressingly on the dog's head. The lips involuntarily writhed back to display the gleaming fangs; then the great beast bent his head sheepishly, and his tail moved with jerky uncertainty, as if the owner had almost forgotten the emotions of friendliness. Balthus mentally compared the great gaunt hard body with the fat sleek hounds tumbling vociferously over one another in his father's kennel yard. He sighed. The frontier was no less hard for beasts than for men. This dog had almost forgotten the meaning of kindness and friendliness.

Slasher glided ahead, and Conan let him take the lead. The last tinge of dusk faded into stark darkness. The miles fell away under their steady feet. Slasher seemed voiceless. Suddenly he halted, tense, ears lifted. An instant later the men heard it—a demoniac yelling up the river ahead of them, faint as a whisper.

Conan swore like a madman.

'They've attacked the fort! We're too late! Come on!'

He increased his pace, trusting to the dog to smell out ambushes ahead. In a flood of tense excitement Balthus forgot his hunger and weariness. The yells grew louder as they advanced, and above the devilish screaming they could hear the deep shouts of the soldiers. Just as Balthus began to fear they would run into the savages who seemed to be howling just ahead of them, Conan swung away from the river in a wide semicircle that carried them to a low rise from which they could look over the forest. They saw the fort, lighted with torches thrust over the

parapets on long poles. These cast a flickering, uncertain light over the clearing, and in that light they saw throngs of naked, painted figures along the fringe of the clearing. The river swarmed with canoes. The Picts had the fort completely surrounded.

An incessant hail of arrows rained against the stockade from the woods and the river. The deep twanging of the bow-strings rose above the howling. Yelling like wolves, several hundred naked warriors with axes in their hands ran from under the trees and raced toward the eastern gate. They were within a hundred and fifty yards of their objective when a withering blast of arrows from the wall littered the ground with corpses and sent the survivors fleeing back to the trees. The men in the canoes rushed their boats toward the river-wall, and were met by another shower of clothyard shafts and a volley from the small ballistas mounted on towers on that side of the stockade. Stones and logs whirled through the air and splintered and sank half a dozen canoes, killing their occupants, and the other boats drew back out of range. A deep roar of triumph rose from the walls of the fort, answered by bestial howling from all quarters.

'Shall we try to break through?' asked Balthus, trembling with eagerness.

Conan shook his head. He stood with his arms folded, his head slightly bent, a somber and brooding figure.

'The fort's doomed. The Picts are blood-mad, and won't stop until they're all killed. And there are too many of them for the men in the fort to kill. We couldn't break through, and if we did, we could do nothing but die with Valannus.'

'There's nothing we can do but save our own hides, then?'

'Yes. We've got to warn the settlers. Do you know why the Picts are not trying to burn the fort with fire-arrows? Because they don't want a flame that might warn the people to the east. They plan to stamp out the fort, and then sweep east before anyone knows of its fall. They may cross Thunder River and take Velitrium before the people know what's happened. At least they'll destroy every living thing between the fort and Thunder River.

'We've failed to warn the fort, and I see now it would have done no good if we had succeeded. The fort's too poorly manned. A few more charges and the Picts will be over the walls and breaking down the gates. But we can start the settlers toward Velitrium. Come on! We're outside the circle the Picts have thrown around the fort. We'll keep clear of it.'

They swung out in a wide arc, hearing the rising and falling of the volume of the yells, marking each charge and repulse. The men in the fort were holding their own; but the shrieks of the Picts did not diminish in savagery. They vibrated with a timbre that held assurance of ultimate victory.

Before Balthus realized they were close to it, they broke into the road leading east.

'Now run!' grunted Conan. Balthus set his teeth. It was nineteen miles to Velitrium, a good five to Scalp Creek beyond which began the settlements. It seemed to the Aquilonian that they had been fighting and running for centuries. But the nervous excitement that rioted through his blood stimulated him to Herculean efforts.

Slasher ran ahead of them, his head to the ground, snarling low, the first sound they had heard from him.

'Picts ahead of us!' snarled Conan, dropping to one knee and scanning the ground in the starlight. He shook his head, baffled. 'I can't tell how many. Probably only a small party. Some that couldn't wait to take the fort. They've gone ahead to butcher the settlers in their beds! Come on!'

Ahead of them presently they saw a small blaze through the trees, and heard a wild and ferocious chanting. The trail bent there, and leaving it, they cut across the bend, through the thickets. A few moments later they were looking on a hideous sight. An ox-wain stood in the road piled with meager household furnishings; it was burning; the oxen lay near with their throats cut. A man and a woman lay in the road, stripped and mutilated. Five Picts were dancing about them with fantastic leaps and bounds, waving bloody axes; one of them brandished the woman's red-smeared gown.

At the sight a red haze swam before Balthus. Lifting his bow he lined the prancing figure, black against the fire, and loosed. The slayer leaped convulsively and fell dead with the arrow through his heart. Then the two white men and the dog were upon the startled survivors. Conan was animated merely by his fighting spirit and an old, old racial hate, but Balthus was afire with wrath.

He met the first Pict to oppose him with a ferocious swipe that split the painted skull, and sprang over his falling body to grapple with the others. But Conan had already killed one of the two he had chosen, and the leap of the Aquilonian was a second late. The warrior was down with the long sword through him even as Balthus' ax was lifted. Turning toward the remaining Pict, Balthus saw Slasher rise from his victim, his great jaws dripping blood.

Balthus said nothing as he looked down at the pitiful forms in the road beside the burning wain. Both were young, the woman little more than a girl. By some whim of chance the Picts had left her face unmarred, and even in the agonies of an awful death it was beautiful. But her soft young body had been hideously slashed with many knives—a mist clouded Balthus' eyes and he swallowed chokingly. The tragedy momentarily overcame him. He felt like falling upon the ground and weeping and biting the earth.

'Some young couple just hitting out on their own,' Conan was saying as he wiped his sword unemotionally. 'On their way to the fort when the Picts met them. Maybe the boy was going to enter the service; maybe take up land on the river.

Well, that's what will happen to every man, woman and child this side of Thunder River if we don't get them into Velitrium in a hurry.'

Balthus' knees trembled as he followed Conan. But there was no hint of weakness in the long easy stride of the Cimmerian. There was a kinship between him and the great gaunt brute that glided beside him. Slasher no longer growled with his head to the trail. The way was clear before them. The yelling on the river came faintly to them, but Balthus believed the fort was still holding. Conan halted suddenly, with an oath.

He showed Balthus a trail that led north from the road. It was an old trail, partly grown with new young growth, and this growth had recently been broken down. Balthus realized this fact more by feel than sight, though Conan seemed to see like a cat in the dark. The Cimmerian showed him where broad wagon tracks turned off the main trail, deeply indented in the forest mold.

'Settlers going to the licks after salt,' he grunted. 'They're at the edges of the marsh, about nine miles from here. Blast it! They'll be cut off and butchered to a man! Listen! One man can warn the people on the road. Go ahead and wake them up and herd them into Velitrium. I'll go and get the men gathering the salt. They'll be camped by the licks. We won't come back to the road. We'll head straight through the woods.'

With no further comment Conan turned off the trail and hurried down the dim path, and Balthus, after staring after him for a few moments, set out along the road. The dog had remained with him, and glided softly at his heels. When Balthus had gone a few rods he heard the animal growl. Whirling, he glared back the way he had come, and was startled to see a vague ghostly glow vanishing into the forest in the direction Conan had taken. Slasher rumbled deep in his throat, his hackles stiff and his eyes balls of green fire. Balthus remembered the grim apparition that had taken the head of the merchant Tiberias not far from that spot, and he hesitated. The thing must be following Conan. But the giant Cimmerian had repeatedly demonstrated his ability to take care of himself, and Balthus felt his duty lay toward the helpless settlers who slumbered in the path of the red hurricane. The horror of the fiery phantom was overshadowed by the horror of those limp, violated bodies beside the burning ox-wain.

He hurried down the road, crossed Scalp Creek and came in sight of the first settler's cabin—a long, low structure of ax-hewn logs. In an instant he was pounding on the door. A sleepy voice inquired his pleasure.

'Get up! The Picts are over the river!'

That brought instant response. A low cry echoed his words and then the door was thrown open by a woman in a scanty shift. Her hair hung over her bare shoulders in disorder; she held a candle in one hand and an ax in the other. Her face was colorless, her eyes wide with terror.

'Come in!' she begged. 'We'll hold the cabin.'

'No. We must make for Velitrium. The fort can't hold them back. It may have fallen already. Don't stop to dress. Get your children and come on.'

'But my man's gone with the others after salt!' she wailed, wringing her hands. Behind her peered three tousled youngsters, blinking and bewildered.

'Conan's gone after them. He'll fetch them through safe. We must hurry up the road to warn the other cabins.'

Relief flooded her countenance.

'Mitra be thanked!' she cried. 'If the Cimmerian's gone after them, they're safe if mortal man can save them!'

In a whirlwind of activity she snatched up the smallest child and herded the others through the door ahead of her. Balthus took the candle and ground it out under his heel. He listened an instant. No sound came up the dark road.

'Have you got a horse?'

'In the stable,' she groaned. 'Oh, hurry!'

He pushed her aside as she fumbled with shaking hands at the bars. He led the horse out and lifted the children on its back, telling them to hold to its mane and to one another. They stared at him seriously, making no outcry. The woman took the horse's halter and set out up the road. She still gripped her ax and Balthus knew that if cornered she would fight with the desperate courage of a she-panther.

He held behind, listening. He was oppressed by the belief that the fort had been stormed and taken; that the dark-skinned hordes were already streaming up the road toward Velitrium, drunken on slaughter and mad for blood. They would come with the speed of starving wolves.

Presently they saw another cabin looming ahead. The woman started to shriek a warning, but Balthus stopped her. He hurried to the door and knocked. A woman's voice answered him. He repeated his warning, and soon the cabin disgorged its occupants—an old woman, two young women and four children. Like the other woman's husband, their men had gone to the salt licks the day before, unsuspecting of any danger. One of the young women seemed dazed, the other prone to hysteria. But the old woman, a stern old veteran of the frontier, quieted them harshly; she helped Balthus get out the two horses that were stabled in a pen behind the cabin and put the children on them. Balthus urged that she herself mount with them, but she shook her head and made one of the younger women ride.

'She's with child,' grunted the old woman. 'I can walk—and fight, too, if it comes to that.'

As they set out, one of the women said: 'A young couple passed along the

road about dusk; we advised them to spend the night at our cabin, but they were anxious to make the fort tonight. Did—did—'.

'They met the Picts,' answered Balthus briefly, and the woman sobbed in horror.

They were scarcely out of sight of the cabin when some distance behind them quavered a long high-pitched yell.

'A wolf!' exclaimed one of the women.

'A painted wolf with an ax in his hand,' muttered Balthus. 'Go! Rouse the other settlers along the road and take them with you. I'll scout along behind.'

Without a word the old woman herded her charges ahead of her. As they faded into the darkness, Balthus could see the pale ovals that were the faces of the children twisted back over their shoulders to stare toward him. He remembered his own people on the Tauran and a moment's giddy sickness swam over him. With momentary weakness he groaned and sank down in the road; his muscular arm fell over Slasher's massive neck and he felt the dog's warm moist tongue touch his face.

He lifted his head and grinned with a painful effort.

'Come on, boy,' he mumbled, rising. 'We've got work to do.'

A red glow suddenly became evident through the trees. The Picts had fired the last hut. He grinned. How Zogar Sag would froth if he knew his warriors had let their destructive natures get the better of them. The fire would warn the people farther up the road. They would be awake and alert when the fugitives reached them. But his face grew grim. The women were traveling slowly, on foot and on the overloaded horses. The swift-footed Picts would run them down within a mile, unless—he took his position behind a tangle of fallen logs beside the trail. The road west of him was lighted by the burning cabin, and when the Picts came he saw them first—black furtive figures etched against the distant glare.

Drawing a shaft to the head, he loosed and one of the figures crumpled. The rest melted into the woods on either side of the road. Slasher whimpered with the killing lust beside him. Suddenly a figure appeared on the fringe of the trail, under the trees, and began gliding toward the fallen timbers. Balthus' bow-string twanged and the Pict yelped, staggered and fell into the shadows with the arrow through his thigh. Slasher cleared the timbers with a bound and leaped into the bushes. They were violently shaken and then the dog slunk back to Balthus' side, his jaws crimson.

No more appeared in the trail; Balthus began to fear they were stealing past his position through the woods, and when he heard a faint sound to his left he loosed blindly. He cursed as he heard the shaft splinter against a tree, but Slasher glided away as silently as a phantom, and presently Balthus heard a thrashing and a gurgling; then Slasher came like a ghost through the bushes, snuggling his great,

crimson-stained head against Balthus' arm. Blood oozed from a gash in his shoulder, but the sounds in the wood had ceased for ever.

The men lurking on the edges of the road evidently sensed the fate of their companion, and decided that an open charge was preferable to being dragged down in the dark by a devil-beast they could neither see nor hear. Perhaps they realized that only one man lay behind the logs. They came with a sudden rush, breaking cover from both sides of the trail. Three dropped with arrows through them—and the remaining pair hesitated. One turned and ran back down the road, but the other lunged over the breastwork, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the dim light, his ax lifted. Balthus' foot slipped as he sprang up, but the slip saved his life. The descending ax shaved a lock of hair from his head, and the Pict rolled down the logs from the force of his wasted blow. Before he could regain his feet Slasher tore his throat out.

Then followed a tense period of waiting, in which time Balthus wondered if the man who had fled had been the only survivor of the party. Obviously it had been a small band that had either left the fighting at the fort, or was scouting ahead of the main body. Each moment that passed increased the chances for safety of the women and children hurrying toward Velitrium.

Then without warning a shower of arrows whistled over his retreat. A wild howling rose from the woods along the trail. Either the survivor had gone after aid, or another party had joined the first. The burning cabin still smoldered, lending a little light. Then they were after him, gliding through the trees beside the trail. He shot three arrows and threw the bow away. As if sensing his plight, they came on, not yelling now, but in deadly silence except for a swift pad of many feet.

He fiercely hugged the head of the great dog growling at his side, muttered: 'All right, boy, give 'em hell!' and sprang to his feet, drawing his ax. Then the dark figures flooded over the breastworks and closed in a storm of flailing axes, stabbing knives and ripping fangs.

7 The Devil in the Fire

When Conan turned from the Velitrium road he expected a run of some nine miles and set himself to the task. But he had not gone four when he heard the sounds of a party of men ahead of him. From the noise they were making in their progress he knew they were not Picts. He hailed them.

'Who's there?' challenged a harsh voice. 'Stand where you are until we know you, or you'll get an arrow through you.'

'You couldn't hit an elephant in this darkness,' answered Conan impatiently. 'Come on, fool; it's I—Conan. The Picts are over the river.'

'We suspected as much,' answered the leader of the men, as they strode

forward—tall, rangy men, stern-faced, with bows in their hands. 'One of our party wounded an antelope and tracked it nearly to Black River. He heard them yelling down the river and ran back to our camp. We left the salt and the wagons, turned the oxen loose and came as swiftly as we could. If the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will be ranging up the road toward our cabins.'

'Your families are safe,' grunted Conan. 'My companion went ahead to take them to Velitrium. If we go back to the main road we may run into the whole horde. We'll strike southeast, through the timber. Go ahead. I'll scout behind.'

A few moments later the whole band was hurrying southeastward. Conan followed more slowly, keeping just within ear-shot. He cursed the noise they were making; that many Picts or Cimmerians would have moved through the woods with no more noise than the wind makes as it blows through the black branches.

He had just crossed a small glade when he wheeled answering the conviction of his primitive instincts that he was being followed. Standing motionless among the bushes he heard the sounds of the retreating settlers fade away. Then a voice called faintly back along the way he had come: 'Conan! Conan! Wait for me, Conan!'

'Balthus!' he swore bewilderedly. Cautiously he called: 'Here I am.'

'Wait for me, Conan!' the voice came more distinctly.

Conan moved out of the shadows, scowling. 'What the devil are you doing here?—Crom!'

He half crouched, the flesh prickling along his spine. It was not Balthus who was emerging from the other side of the glade. A weird glow burned through the trees. It moved toward him, shimmering weirdly—a green witch-fire that moved with purpose and intent.

It halted some feet away and Conan glared at it, trying to distinguish its fire-misted outlines. The quivering flame had a solid core; the flame was but a green garment that masked some animate and evil entity; but the Cimmerian was unable to make out its shape or likeness. Then, shockingly, a voice spoke to him from amidst the fiery column.

'Why do you stand like a sheep waiting for the butcher, Conan?'

The voice was human but carried strange vibrations that were not human.

'Sheep?' Conan's wrath got the best of his momentary awe. 'Do you think I'm afraid of a damned Pictish swamp devil? A friend called me.'

'I called in his voice,' answered the other. 'The men you follow belong to my brother; I would not rob his knife of their blood. But you are mine. Oh, fool, you have come from the far gray hills of Cimmeria to meet your doom in the forests of Conajohara.'

'You've had your chance at me before now,' snorted Conan. 'Why didn't

you kill me then, if you could?'

'My brother had not painted a skull black for you and hurled it into the fire that burns for ever on Gullah's black altar. He had not whispered your name to the black ghosts that haunt the uplands of the Dark Land. But a bat has flown over the Mountains of the Dead and drawn your image in blood on the white tiger's hide that hangs before the long hut where sleep the Four Brothers of the Night. The great serpents coil about their feet and the stars burn like fire-flies in their hair.'

'Why have the gods of darkness doomed me to death?' growled Conan.

Something—a hand, foot or talon, he could not tell which, thrust out from the fire and marked swiftly on the mold. A symbol blazed there, marked with fire, and faded, but not before he recognized it.

'You dared make the sign which only a priest of Jhebbal Sag dare make. Thunder rumbled through the black Mountain of the Dead and the altar-hut of Gullah was thrown down by a wind from the Gulf of Ghosts. The loon which is messenger to the Four Brothers of the Night flew swiftly and whispered your name in my ear. Your head will hang in the altar-hut of my brother. Your body will be eaten by the black-winged, sharp-beaked Children of Jhil.'

'Who the devil is your brother?' demanded Conan. His sword was naked in his hand, and he was subtly loosening the ax in his belt.

'Zogar Sag; a child of Jhebbal Sag who still visits his sacred groves at times. A woman of Gwawela slept in a grove holy to Jhebbal Sag. Her babe was Zogar Sag. I too am a son of Jhebbal Sag, out of a fire-being from a far realm. Zogar Sag summoned me out of the Misty Lands. With incantations and sorcery and his own blood he materialized me in the flesh of his own planet. We are one, tied together by invisible threads. His thoughts are my thoughts; if he is struck, I am bruised. If I am cut, he bleeds. But I have talked enough. Soon your ghost will talk with the ghosts of the Dark Land, and they will tell you of the old gods which are not dead, but sleep in the outer abysses, and from time to time awake.'

'I'd like to see what you look like,' muttered Conan, working his ax free, 'you who leave a track like a bird, who burn like a flame and yet speak with a human voice.'

'You shall see,' answered the voice from the flame, 'see, and carry the knowledge with you into the Dark Land.'

The flames leaped and sank, dwindling and dimming. A face began to take shadowy form. At first Conan thought it was Zogar Sag himself who stood wrapped in green fire. But the face was higher than his own and there was a demoniac aspect about it—Conan had noted various abnormalities about Zogar Sag's features—an obliqueness of the eyes, a sharpness of the ears, a wolfish thinness of the lips; these peculiarities were exaggerated in the apparition which swayed before him. The eyes were red as coals of living fire.

More details came into view: a slender torso, covered with snaky scales, which was yet man-like in shape, with man-like arms, from the waist upward; below, long crane-like legs ended in splay, three-toed feet like those of some huge bird. Along the monstrous limbs the blue fire fluttered and ran. He saw it as through a glistening mist.

Then suddenly it was towering over him, though he had not seen it move toward him. A long arm, which for the first time he noticed was armed with curving, sickle-like talons, swung high and swept down at his neck. With a fierce cry he broke the spell and bounded aside, hurling his ax. The demon avoided the cast with an unbelievably quick movement of its narrow head and was on him again with a hissing rush of leaping flames.

But fear had fought for it when it slew its other victims, and Conan was not afraid. He knew that any being clothed in material flesh can be slain by material weapons, however grisly its form may be.

One flailing talon-armed limb knocked his helmet from his head. A little lower and it would have decapitated him. But fierce joy surged through him as his savagely driven sword sank deep in the monster's groin. He bounded backward from a flailing stroke, tearing his sword free as he leaped. The talons raked his breast, ripping through mail-links as if they had been cloth. But his return spring was like that of a starving wolf. He was inside the lashing arms and driving his sword deep in the monster's belly—felt the arms lock about him and the talons ripping the mail from his back as they sought his vitals—he was lapped and dazzled by blue flame that was chill as ice—then he had torn fiercely away from the weakening arms and his sword cut the air in a tremendous swipe.

The demon staggered and fell sprawling sidewise, its head hanging only by a shred of flesh. The fires that veiled it leaped fiercely upward, now red as gushing blood, hiding the figure from view. A scent of burning flesh filled Conan's nostrils. Shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes, he wheeled and ran staggering through the woods. Blood trickled down his limbs. Somewhere, miles to the south, he saw the faint glow of flames that might mark a burning cabin. Behind him, toward the road, rose a distant howling that spurred him to greater efforts.

8 Conajohara No More

There had been fighting on Thunder River; fierce fighting before the walls of Velitrium; ax and torch had been piled up and down the bank, and many a settler's cabin lay in ashes before the painted horde was rolled back.

A strange quiet followed the storm, in which people gathered and talked in hushed voices, and men with red-stained bandages drank their ale silently in the taverns along the river bank.

There, to Conan the Cimmerian, moodily quaffing from a great wine-glass,

came a gaunt forester with a bandage about his head and his arm in a sling. He was the one survivor of Fort Tuscelan.

'You went with the soldiers to the ruins of the fort?'

Conan nodded.

'I wasn't able,' murmured the other. 'There was no fighting?'

'The Picts had fallen back across the Black River. Something must have broken their nerve, though only the devil who made them knows what.'

The woodsman glanced at his bandaged arm and sighed.

'They say there were no bodies worth disposing of.'

Conan shook his head. 'Ashes. The Picts had piled them in the fort and set fire to the fort before they crossed the river. Their own dead and the men of Valannus.'

'Valannus was killed among the last—in the hand-to-hand fighting when they broke the barriers. They tried to take him alive, but he made them kill him. They took ten of the rest of us prisoners when we were so weak from fighting we could fight no more. They butchered nine of us then and there. It was when Zogar Sag died that I got my chance to break free and run for it.'

'Zogar Sag's dead?' ejaculated Conan.

'Aye. I saw him die. That's why the Picts didn't press the fight against Velitrium as fiercely as they did against the fort. It was strange. He took no wounds in battle. He was dancing among the slain, waving an ax with which he'd just brained the last of my comrades. He came at me, howling like a wolf—and then he staggered and dropped the ax, and began to reel in a circle screaming as I never heard a man or beast scream before. He fell between me and the fire they'd built to roast me, gagging and frothing at the mouth, and all at once he went rigid and the Picts shouted that he was dead. It was during the confusion that I slipped my cords and ran for the woods.

'I saw him lying in the firelight. No weapon had touched him. Yet there were red marks like the wounds of a sword in the groin, belly and neck—the last as if his head had been almost severed from his body. What do you make of that?'

Conan made no reply, and the forester, aware of the reticence of barbarians on certain matters, continued: 'He lived by magic, and somehow, he died by magic. It was the mystery of his death that took the heart out of the Picts. Not a man who saw it was in the fighting before Velitrium. They hurried back across Black River. Those that struck Thunder River were warriors who had come on before Zogar Sag died. They were not enough to take the city by themselves.

'I came along the road, behind their main force, and I know none followed me from the fort. I sneaked through their lines and got into the town. You brought the settlers through all right, but their women and children got into Velitrium just

ahead of those painted devils. If the youth Balthus and old Slasher hadn't held them up awhile, they'd have butchered every woman and child in Conajohara. I passed the place where Balthus and the dog made their last stand. They were lying amid a heap of dead Picts—I counted seven, brained by his ax, or disemboweled by the dog's fangs, and there were others in the road with arrows sticking in them. Gods, what a fight that must have been!'

'He was a man,' said Conan. 'I drink to his shade, and to the shade of the dog, who knew no fear.' He quaffed part of the wine, then emptied the rest upon the floor, with a curious heathen gesture, and smashed the goblet. 'The heads of ten Picts shall pay for his, and seven heads for the dog, who was a better warrior than many a man.'

And the forester, staring into the moody, smoldering blue eyes, knew the barbaric oath would be kept.

'They'll not rebuild the fort?'

'No; Conajohara is lost to Aquilonia. The frontier has been pushed back. Thunder River will be the new border.'

The woodsman sighed and stared at his calloused hand, worn from contact with ax-haft and sword-hilt. Conan reached his long arm for the wine-jug. The forester stared at him, comparing him with the men about them, the men who had died along the lost river, comparing him with those other wild men over that river. Conan did not seem aware of his gaze.

'Barbarism is the natural state of mankind,' the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. 'Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.'

BEYOND THE DOOR

Did you ever wonder at the lonely life the bird in a cuckoo clock has to lead—that it might possibly love and hate just as easily as a real animal of flesh and blood? Philip Dick used that idea for this brief fantasy tale. We're sure that after reading it you'll give cuckoo clocks more respect.

Larry Thomas bought a cuckoo clock for his wife—without knowing the price he would have to pay.

That night at the dinner table he brought it out and set it down beside her plate. Doris stared at it, her hand to her mouth. "My God, what is it?" She looked up at him, bright-eyed.

"Well, open it."

Doris tore the ribbon and paper from the square package with her sharp nails, her bosom rising and falling. Larry stood watching her as she lifted the lid.

He lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall.

"A cuckoo clock!" Doris cried. "A real old cuckoo clock like my mother had." She turned the clock over and over. "Just like my mother had, when Pete was still alive." Her eyes sparkled with tears.

"It's made in Germany," Larry said. After a moment he added, "Carl got it for me wholesale. He knows some guy in the clock business. Otherwise I wouldn't have—" He stopped.

Doris made a funny little sound.

"I mean, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to afford it." He scowled. "What's the matter with you? You've got your clock, haven't you? Isn't that what you want?"

Doris sat holding onto the clock, her fingers pressed against the brown wood.

"Well," Larry said, "what's the matter?"

He watched in amazement as she leaped up and ran from the room, still clutching the clock. He shook his head. "Never satisfied. They're all that way. Never get enough."

He sat down at the table and finished his meal.

The cuckoo clock was not very large. It was hand-made, however, and there were countless frets on it, little indentations and ornaments scored in the soft wood. Doris sat on the bed drying her eyes and winding the clock. She set the hands by her wristwatch. Presently she carefully moved the hands to two minutes of ten. She carried the clock over to the dresser and propped it up.

Then she sat waiting, her hands twisted together in her lap—waiting for the cuckoo to come out, for the hour to strike.

As she sat she thought about Larry and what he had said. And what she had said, too, for that matter—not that she could be blamed for any of it. After all, she couldn't keep listening to him forever without defending herself; you had to blow your own trumpet in the world.

She touched her handkerchief to her eyes suddenly. Why did he have to say that, about getting it wholesale? Why did he have to spoil it all? If he felt that way he needn't have got it in the first place. She clenched her fists. He was so mean, so damn mean.

But she was glad of the little clock sitting there ticking to itself, with its funny grilled edges and the door. Inside the door was the cuckoo, waiting to come out. Was he listening, his head cocked on one side, listening to hear the clock strike so that he would know to come out?

Did he sleep between hours? Well, she would soon see him: she could ask him. And she would show the clock to Bob. He would love it; Bob loved old things,

even old stamps and buttons. He liked to go with her to the stores. Of course, it was a little awkward, but Larry had been staying at the office so much, and that helped. If only Larry didn't call up sometimes to—

There was a whirr. The clock shuddered and all at once the door opened. The cuckoo came out, sliding swiftly. He paused and looked around solemnly, scrutinizing her, the room, the furniture.

It was the first time he had seen her, she realized, smiling to herself in pleasure. She stood up, coming toward him shyly. "Go on," she said. "I'm waiting."

The cuckoo opened his bill. He whirred and chirped, quickly, rhythmically. Then, after a moment of contemplation, he retired. And the door snapped shut.

She was delighted. She clapped her hands and spun in a little circle. He was marvelous, perfect! And the way he had looked around, studying her, sizing her up. He liked her; she was certain of it. And she, of course, loved him at once, completely. He was just what she had hoped would come out of the little door.

Doris went to the clock. She bent over the little door, her lips close to the wood. "Do you hear me?" she whispered. "I think you're the most wonderful cuckoo in the world." She paused, embarrassed. "I hope you'll like it here."

Then she went downstairs again, slowly, her head high.

Larry and the cuckoo clock really never got along well from the start. Doris said it was because he didn't wind it right, and it didn't like being only half-wound all the time. Larry turned the job of winding over to her; the cuckoo came out every quarter hour and ran the spring down without remorse, and someone had to be ever after it, winding it up again.

Doris did her best, but she forgot a good deal of the time. Then Larry would throw his newspaper down with an elaborate weary motion and stand up. He would go into the dining-room where the clock was mounted on the wall over the fireplace. He would take the clock down and making sure that he had his thumb over the little door, he would wind it up.

"Why do you put your thumb over the door?" Doris asked once.

"You're supposed to."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? I wonder if it isn't that you don't want him to come out while you're standing so close."

"Why not?"

"Maybe you're afraid of him."

Larry laughed. He put the clock back on the wall and gingerly removed his thumb. When Doris wasn't looking he examined his thumb.

There was still a trace of the nick cut out of the soft part of it. Who—or what—had pecked at him?

* * * * *

One Saturday morning, when Larry was down at the office working over some important special accounts, Bob Chambers came to the front porch and rang the bell.

Doris was taking a quick shower. She dried herself and slipped into her robe. When she opened the door Bob stepped inside, grinning.

"Hi," he said, looking around.

"It's all right. Larry's at the office."

"Fine." Bob gazed at her slim legs below the hem of the robe. "How nice you look today."

She laughed. "Be careful! Maybe I shouldn't let you in after all."

They looked at one another, half amused half frightened. Presently Bob said, "If you want, I'll—"

"No, for God's sake." She caught hold of his sleeve. "Just get out of the doorway so I can close it. Mrs. Peters across the street, you know."

She closed the door. "And I want to show you something," she said. "You haven't seen it."

He was interested. "An antique? Or what?"

She took his arm, leading him toward the dining-room. "You'll love it, Bobby." She stopped, wide-eyed. "I hope you will. You must; you must love it. It means so much to me—he means so much."

"He?" Bob frowned. "Who is he?"

Doris laughed. "You're jealous! Come on." A moment later they stood before the clock, looking up at it. "He'll come out in a few minutes. Wait until you see him. I know you two will get along just fine."

"What does Larry think of him?"

"They don't like each other. Sometimes when Larry's here he won't come out. Larry gets mad if he doesn't come out on time. He says—"

"Says what?"

Doris looked down. "He always says he's been robbed, even if he did get it wholesale." She brightened. "But I know he won't come out because he doesn't like Larry. When I'm here alone he comes right out for me, every fifteen minutes, even though he really only has to come out on the hour."

She gazed up at the clock. "He comes out for me because he wants to. We talk; I tell him things. Of course, I'd like to have him upstairs in my room, but it wouldn't be right."

There was the sound of footsteps on the front porch. They looked at each other, horrified.

Larry pushed the front door open, grunting. He set his briefcase down and

took off his hat. Then he saw Bob for the first time.

"Chambers. I'll be damned." His eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?" He came into the dining-room. Doris drew her robe about her helplessly, backing away.

"I—" Bob began. "That is, we—" He broke off, glancing at Doris. Suddenly the clock began to whirr. The cuckoo came rushing out, bursting into sound. Larry moved toward him.

"Shut that din off," he said. He raised his fist toward the clock. The cuckoo snapped into silence and retreated. The door closed. "That's better." Larry studied Doris and Bob, standing mutely together.

"I came over to look at the clock," Bob said. "Doris told me that it's a rare antique and that—"

"Nuts. I bought it myself." Larry walked up to him. "Get out of here." He turned to Doris. "You too. And take that damn clock with you."

He paused, rubbing his chin. "No. Leave the clock here. It's mine; I bought it and paid for it."

In the weeks that followed after Doris left, Larry and the cuckoo clock got along even worse than before. For one thing, the cuckoo stayed inside most of the time, sometimes even at twelve o'clock when he should have been busiest. And if he did come out at all he usually spoke only once or twice, never the correct number of times. And there was a sullen, uncooperative note in his voice, a jarring sound that made Larry uneasy and a little angry.

But he kept the clock wound, because the house was very still and quiet and it got on his nerves not to hear someone running around, talking and dropping things. And even the whirring of a clock sounded good to him.

But he didn't like the cuckoo at all. And sometimes he spoke to him.

"Listen," he said late one night to the closed little door. "I know you can hear me. I ought to give you back to the Germans—back to the Black Forest." He paced back and forth. "I wonder what they're doing now, the two of them. That young punk with his books and his antiques. A man shouldn't be interested in antiques; that's for women."

He set his jaw. "Isn't that right?"

The clock said nothing. Larry walked up in front of it. "Isn't that right?" he demanded. "Don't you have anything to say?"

He looked at the face of the clock. It was almost eleven, just a few seconds before the hour. "All right. I'll wait until eleven. Then I want to hear what you have to say. You've been pretty quiet the last few weeks since she left."

He grinned wryly. "Maybe you don't like it here since she's gone." He scowled. "Well, I paid for you, and you're coming out whether you like it or not.

You hear me?''

Eleven o'clock came. Far off, at the end of town, the great tower clock boomed sleepily to itself. But the little door remained shut. Nothing moved. The minute hand passed on and the cuckoo did not stir. He was someplace inside the clock, beyond the door, silent and remote.

''All right, if that's the way you feel,'' Larry murmured, his lips twisting. ''But it isn't fair. It's your job to come out. We all have to do things we don't like.''

He went unhappily into the kitchen and opened the great gleaming refrigerator. As he poured himself a drink he thought about the clock.

There was no doubt about it—the cuckoo should come out, Doris or no Doris. He had always liked her, from the very start. They had got along well, the two of them. Probably he liked Bob too—probably he had seen enough of Bob to get to know him. They would be quite happy together, Bob and Doris and the cuckoo.

Larry finished his drink. He opened the drawer at the sink and took out the hammer. He carried it carefully into the dining-room. The clock was ticking gently to itself on the wall.

''Look,'' he said, waving the hammer. ''You know what I have here? You know what I'm going to do with it? I'm going to start on you—first.'' He smiled. ''Birds of a feather, that's what you are—the three of you.''

The room was silent.

''Are you coming out? Or do I have to come in and get you?''

The clock whirred a little.

''I hear you in there. You've got a lot of talking to do, enough for the last three weeks. As I figure it, you owe me—''

The door opened. The cuckoo came out fast, straight at him. Larry was looking down, his brow wrinkled in thought. He glanced up, and the cuckoo caught him squarely in the eye.

Down he went, hammer and chair and everything, hitting the floor with a tremendous crash. For a moment the cuckoo paused, its small body poised rigidly. Then it went back inside its house. The door snapped tight-shut after it.

The man lay on the floor, stretched out grotesquely, his head bent over to one side. Nothing moved or stirred. The room was completely silent, except, of course, for the ticking of the clock.

* * * * *

''I see,'' Doris said, her face tight. Bob put his arm around her, steadying her.

''Doctor,'' Bob said, ''can I ask you something?''

''Of course,'' the doctor said.

''Is it very easy to break your neck, falling from so low a chair? It wasn't

very far to fall. I wonder if it might not have been an accident. Is there any chance it might have been—"

"Suicide?" the doctor rubbed his jaw. "I never heard of anyone committing suicide that way. It was an accident; I'm positive."

"I don't mean suicide," Bob murmured under his breath, looking up at the clock on the wall. "I meant something else."

But no one heard him.

BEYOND THE VANISHING POINT

THEY OPENED THE PANDORA'S BOX OF ATOMIC TRAVEL

When George Randolph first caught sight of Orena, he was astounded by its gleaming perfection. Here were hills and valleys, lakes and streams, glowing with the light of the most precious of metals. And, more astonishing than that, it was a world of miniature perfection—an infinitely tiny universe within a golden atom!

But for Randolph it was also a world aglow with danger. Somewhere in its tiny vastness were the friends he had to rescue. Captives of a madman, they had been reduced to native Orena size; to return to Earth they needed the growth capsules Randolph was bringing them. It was up to Randolph to find them—and quickly—for the longer they stayed tiny, the closer they came to passing BEYOND THE VANISHING POINT!

CHAPTER I

It was shortly after noon of December 31, 1970, when the series of weird and startling events began which took me into the tiny world of an atom of gold, beyond the vanishing point, beyond the range of even the highest-powered electric-microscope. My name is George Randolph. I was, that momentous afternoon, assistant chemist for the Ajax International Dye Company, with main offices in New York City.

It was twelve-twenty when the local exchange call-sorter announced Alan's connection from Quebec.

"Hello, George? Look here, you've got to come up here at once. Chateau Frontenac, Quebec. Will you come?"

I could see his face imaged in the little mirror on my desk; the anxiety, tenseness in his voice, was duplicated in his expression.

"Well—" I began.

"You must, George. Babs and I need you. See here...."

He tried at first to make it sound like an invitation for a New Year's Eve holi-

day. But I knew it was not that. Alan and Barbara were my best friends. They were twins, eighteen years old. I felt that Alan would always be my best friend; but for Babs, my hopes, longings, went far deeper, though as yet I had never brought myself to the point of telling her so.

"I'd like to come, Alan. But—"

"You've got to George! I can't tell you everything over the public air. But I've seen *him*: He's diabolical. I know it now!"

Him! It could only mean, of all the world, one person!

"He's here!" he went on. "Near here. We saw him today! I didn't want to tell you, but that's why we came. It seemed a long chance, but it's he, I'm positive!"

I was staring at the image of Alan's eyes; there was horror in them. And his voice too. "God, George, it's weird! Weird, I tell you. His looks—he—oh I can't tell you now! Only, come!"

* * * * *

I was busy at the office in spite of the holiday season, but I dropped everything and went. By one o'clock that afternoon I was wheeling my little sport Midge from its cage on the roof of the Metropole building, and went into the air.

It was a cold gray afternoon with the feel of coming snow. I made a good two hundred and fifty miles at first, taking the northbound through-traffic lane which today the meteorological conditions had placed at an altitude of 6,200 feet.

Flying is largely automatic. There was not enough traffic to bother me. The details of leaving the office so hastily had been too engrossing for thought of Alan and Babs. But now, in my little pit at the controls, my mind flung ahead. They had located him. That meant Franz Polter, for whom we had been searching nearly four years. And my memory went back into the past with vivid vision....

* * * * *

The Kents, four years ago, were living on Long Island. Alan and Babs were fourteen at the time, and I was seventeen. Even then Babs was something kind of special to me. I lived in a neighboring house that summer and saw them every day.

To my adolescent mind a thrilling mystery hung upon the Kent family. The mother was dead. Dr. Kent, father of Alan and Babs, maintained a luxurious home, with only a housekeeper and no other servant. Dr. Kent was a retired chemist. He had, in his home, a laboratory in which he was working upon some mysterious problem. His children did not know what it was, nor, of course, did I. And none of us had ever been in the laboratory, except that when occasion offered we stole surreptitious peeps.

I recall Dr. Kent as a kindly, iron-gray haired gentleman. He was stern with the discipline of his children; but he loved them, and was indulgent in many ways.

They loved him; and I, an orphan, began looking upon him almost as a father. I was interested in chemistry. He knew it, and did his best to help and encourage me in my studies.

There came an afternoon in the summer of 1966, when arriving at the Kent home, I ran upon a startling scene. The only other member of the household was a young fellow of twenty-five, named Franz Polter. He was a foreigner, born, I understood, in one of the Balkan Protectorates; he was here, employed by Dr. Kent as laboratory assistant.

He had been with the Kents, at this time, two years. Alan and Babs didn't like him, nor did I. He must have been a clever, skillful chemist. No doubt he was. But he was, to us, repulsive. A hunchback, with a short, thick body; dangling arms that suggested a gorilla; barrel chest; a lump set askew on his left shoulder, and his massive head planted down with almost no neck. His face was rugged in feature; a wide mouth, a high-bridged heavy nose; and above the face a great shock of wavy black hair. It was an intelligent face; in itself, not repulsive.

But I think we all three feared Franz Polter. There was always something sinister about him, that had nothing to do with his deformity.

When I came, that afternoon, Babs and Polter were under a tree on the Kent lawn. Babs, at fourteen, with long black braids down her back, bare-legged and short-skirted in a summer sport costume, was standing against the tree with Polter facing her. They were about the same height. To my youthful imaginative mind rose the fleeting picture of a young girl in a forest menaced by a gorilla.

I came upon them suddenly. I heard Polter say:

"But I lof you. And you are almos' a woman. Some day you lof me."

He put out his thick hand and gripped her shoulder. She tried to twist away. She was frightened, but she laughed.

"You—you're crazy!"

He was suddenly holding her in his arms, and she was fighting him. I dashed forward. Babs was always a spunky sort of girl. In spite of her fear now, she kept on struggling, and she shouted:

"You—let me go, you—you hunchback!"

He did let her go; but in a frenzy of rage he hauled back his hand and struck her in the face. I was upon him the next second. I had him down on the lawn, punching him; but though at seventeen I was a reasonably husky lad, the hunchback with his thick, hairy gorilla arms proved much stronger. He heaved me off. The commotion had brought Alan and without waiting to find out what the trouble was, he jumped on Polter. Between us, I think we would have beaten him pretty badly. But the housekeeper summoned Dr. Kent and the fight was over.

Polter left for good within an hour. He did not speak to any of us. But I saw

him as he put his luggage into the taxi which Dr. Kent had summoned. I was standing silently nearby with Babs and Alan. The look he flung us as he drove away carried an unmistakable menace—the promise of vengeance. And I think now that in his warped and twisted mind he was telling himself that he would some day make Babs regret that she had repulsed his love.

What happened that night none of us ever knew. Dr. Kent worked late in his laboratory; he was there when Alan and Babs and the housekeeper went to bed. He had written a note to Alan; it was found on his desk in a corner of the laboratory next morning, addressed in care of the family lawyer to be given Alan in the event of his death. It said very little. Described a tiny fragment of gold quartz rock the size of a walnut which would be found under the giant microscope in the laboratory; and told Alan to give it to the American Scientific Society to be guarded and watched very carefully.

This note was found, but Dr. Kent had vanished! There had been a midnight marauder. The laboratory was on the lower floor of the house. Through one of its open windows, so the police said, an intruder had entered. There was evidence of a struggle, but it must have been short, because neither Babs, Alan, the housekeeper, nor any of the neighbors had heard anything. And the fragment of golden quartz was gone!

The police investigation came to nothing. Polter was found in New York. He withstood the police questions. There was nothing except suspicion upon which he could be held, and he was finally released. Immediately thereafter, he disappeared.

Neither Alan, Babs nor I saw Polter again. Dr. Kent had never been heard from to this day, four years later when I flew to join the twins in Quebec. And now Alan told me that Polter was up there! We had never ceased to believe that Dr. Kent was alive, and that Polter was the midnight marauder. As we grew older, we began to search for Polter. It seemed to us, that if we could once get our hands on him, we could drag from him the truth which the police had failed to get.

The call of a traffic director in mid-Vermont brought me back from these memories. My buzzer was clanging; a peremptory halting signal day-beam came darting up at me from below. It caught me and clung. I shouted down at it.

"What's the matter?" I gave my name and number and all the details in one breath. Above everything I had no wish to be halted now. "What's the matter? I haven't done anything wrong."

"The hell you haven't," the director roared. "Come down to three thousand. That lane's barred."

I dove obediently and his beam followed me. "Once more, like that, young fellow—" But he went busy with somebody else and I didn't hear the end of his threat.

I crossed into Maine in mid-afternoon. It was already twilight. The sky was solid lead and the landscape all up through here was gray-white with snow in the gathering darkness. I passed the City of Jackman, crossing full over it to take no chances of annoying the border officials; and a few miles further, I dropped to the glaring lights of International Inspection Field. The formalities were soon finished. I was ready to take-off when Alan rushed at me.

"George! I thought I could connect here." He gripped me. He was wild-eyed, incoherent. He waved his taxiplane away. "I'm going with you, George. I'm almost out of my mind. I can't—I don't know what's happened to her. She's gone, now—"

"Who's gone? Babs?"

"Yes." He pushed me into my plane and climbed in after me. "Don't talk. Get us up! I'll tell you then. I shouldn't have left."

When we were up in the air, I swung on him. "What are you talking about? Babs gone?"

I could feel myself shuddering with a nameless horror.

"I don't know what I'm talking about, George. I'm about crazy. The Quebec police think I am, anyway. I've been raising hell with them for an hour. Babs is gone! I can't find her. I don't know where she is."

He finally calmed down enough to tell me what happened. Shortly after his radiophone to me in New York, he had missed Babs. They had had lunch in the huge hotel and then walked on the Dufferin Terrace—the famous promenade outside looking down over the Lower City, the great sweep of the St. Lawrence River and the gray-white distant Laurentian mountains.

"I was to meet her inside. I went in ahead of her. But she didn't come. I went back to the Terrace but she was gone. She wasn't in our rooms. Nor the library, the lobby—anywhere."

But it was afternoon, in the public place of a civilized city. In the daylight of the Dufferin Terrace, beside the long ice toboggan slide, under the gaze of skaters on the ice-rink and several hundred holiday merrymakers, a young girl could hardly be murdered, or kidnapped, without attracting attention! The Quebec police thought the young American unduly excited about his sister, who was missing only an hour. They would do what they could, if by dark she had not rejoined him. They suggested that doubtless the young lady had gone shopping.

"Maybe she did," I agreed. But in my heart, I felt differently. "She'll be waiting for us in the Hotel when we get there, Alan."

"But I'm telling you we saw Polter this morning. He lives here—not thirty miles from Quebec. We saw him on the Terrace after breakfast. Recognized him immediately of course."

"Did he see you?"

"I don't know. He was lost in the crowd in a minute. But I asked a young French fellow if he knew him. He did know him, as Frank Rascor. That must be the name he wears now. He's a famous man up here—well known, immensely rich. I didn't know if he saw us or not. What a fool I was to leave Babs alone, even for a minute."

We were speeding over a white-clad valley with a little frozen river winding down its middle. Night had almost come. The leaden sky was low above us. It began snowing. The lights of the small villages along the river were barely visible.

"Can you land us, Alan?"

"Yes, surely. At the Municipal Field just beyond the Citadel. We can get to the Hotel in five minutes."

* * * * *

It was a flight of only half an hour. During it, Alan told me about Polter. The hunchback, known now as Frank Rascor, owned a mine in the Laurentians, some thirty miles from Quebec City—a fabulously productive mine of gold. It was an anomaly that gold should be produced in this region. No vein of gold-bearing rock had been found, except the one on Polter's property. Alan had seen a newspaper account of the strangeness of it; and on a hunch had come to Quebec, being intrigued by the description of the mine owner. He had seen Frank Rascor on the Dufferin Terrace, and recognized him as Polter.

Again my thoughts went back into the past. Had Polter stolen that missing fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut which had been beneath Dr. Kent's microscope? We always thought so. Dr. Kent had some secret, some great problem upon which he was working. Polter, his assistant, had evidently known, or partially known, its details. And now, four years later, Polter was immensely rich, with a "gold mine" in mountains where there was no other evidence of gold!

I seemed to see some connection. Alan, I knew, was groping with a dim idea, so strange he hardly dared voice it.

"I tell you, it's weird, George. The sight of him. Polter—heavens, one couldn't mistake that build—and his face, his features, just the same as when we knew him."

"Then what's so weird?" I demanded.

"His age." There was a queer solemn hush in Alan's voice. "George, when we knew Polter, he was about twenty-five, wasn't he? Well, that was four years ago. But he isn't twenty-nine now. I swear it is the same man, but he isn't around thirty. Don't ask me what I'm talking about. I don't know. But he isn't thirty. He's nearer fifty! Unnatural! Weird! I felt it, and so did Babs, just that brief look we had of him."

I didn't answer. My attention was on managing the plane. The lights of Levis were under us. Beyond the City cliffs, the St. Lawrence lay in its deep valley; the Quebec lights, the light-dotted ramparts with the Terrace and the great fortresslike Hotel showed across the river.

"Better take the stick, Alan. I don't know where the field is. And don't you worry about Babs. She'll be back by now."

* * * * *

But she was not. We went to the two connecting rooms in the tower of the Hotel which Alan and Babs had engaged. We inquired with half a dozen phone calls. No one had seen or heard from her. The Quebec police were sending a man up to talk with Alan.

"Well, we won't be here," Alan called to me. He was standing by the window in Babs' room; he was trembling too much to use the phone. I hung up the receiver and went though the connecting door to join him.

Babs' room! It sent a pang through me. A few of her garments were lying around. A negligee was laid out on the large bed. A velvet boudoir doll—she had always loved them—stood on the dresser. Upon this Hotel room, in one day, she had impressed her personality. Her perfume was in the air. And now she was gone.

"We won't be here," Alan was repeating. He gripped me at the window. "Look." In his hand was an ugly-looking, smokeless, soundless automatic of the Essen type. "And I've got another one for you. Brought them with me."

His face was white and drawn, but his hands had steadied. The tremble was gone out of his voice.

"I'm going after him, George! Now! Understand that? Now? His place is only thirty miles from here, out there in the mountains. You can see it in the daylight—a wall around his property and a stone castle which he built in the middle of it. A gold mine? Hell!"

There was nothing to be seen now out of the window but the snow-filled darkness, the blurred lights of Lower Quebec and the line of dock lights five hundred feet below us.

"Will you fly me, George?"

"Of course."

I was the one trembling now; the cool feel of the automatic which Alan thrust into my hand seemed suddenly to crystallize Babs' peril. I was here in her room, with the scent of her perfume around me, and this deadly weapon was needed! But the trembling was gone in a moment.

"Yes, of course, Alan. No use talking to the police. I gave them all the information—a description of her, what you said she was wearing. No sense dragging Polter's name into it, with nothing tangible to go on. The police won't ransack the

castle of a rich man just because you can't find your sister. Come on. You can tell me what this place is like as we go."

* * * * *

Bundled in our flying suits we hurried from the Hotel, climbed the Citadel slope and in ten minutes were in the air. The wind sucked at us. The snow now was falling with thick, huge flakes. Directed by Alan, I headed out over this ice-filled St. Lawrence, past the frozen Ile d'Orleans, toward Polter's mysterious mountain castle.

Suddenly Alan burst out, "I know what father's secret was! I can piece it together now, from little things that were meaningless when I was a kid. He invented the electro-microscope. You know that. The infinitely small fascinated him. I remember he once said that if we could see far enough down into smallness, we would come upon human life!"

Alan's low, tense voice was more vehement than I had ever heard it before. "It's clear to me now, George. That little fragment of golden quartz which he wanted me to be so careful of contained a world with human inhabitants! Father knew it, or suspected it. And I think the chemical problem on which he was working aimed for some drug. I know it was a drug they were compounding, Polter said so once, a radioactive drug; I remember listening at the door. A drug, George, capable of making a human being infinitely small!"

I did not answer when momentarily Alan paused. So strange a thing. My mind whirled with it; struggled to encompass it. And like the meaningless individual pieces of a puzzle, dropping so easily into place when the key piece is fitted, I saw Polter stealing that fragment of gold; abducting Dr. Kent—perhaps because Polter himself was not fully acquainted with the secret. And now, Polter up here with a fabulously rich "gold mine." And Babs, abducted by him, to be taken—where?

It set me shuddering.

"That's what it was," Alan reiterated. "And Polter, here now with what he calls a 'mine.' It isn't a mine, it's a laboratory! He's got father too, hidden God knows where! And now Babs. We've got to get them, George! The police can't help us! It's just you and me, to fight this thing. And it's diabolical!"

CHAPTER II

We soared over the divided channel of the St. Lawrence, between Orleans and the mainland. Montmorency Falls in a moment showed dimly white through the murk to our left, a great hanging veil of ice higher than Niagara. Further ahead, the lights of the little village of St. Anne de Beaupr√© were visible with the gray-black towering hills behind them.

"Swing left, George. Over the mainland. That's St. Anne. We pass this side

of it. Put the mufflers on. This damn thing roars like a tower siren.''

I cut in the muffler and switched off our wing-lights. It was illegal but we were past all thought of that. We were both desperate; the slow prudent process of acting within the law had nothing to do with this affair. We both knew it.

Our little plane was dark, and amid the sounds of this night blizzard our muffled engine couldn't be heard.

Alan touched me. ''There are his lights; see them?''

We had passed St. Anne. The hills lay ahead—a wild mountainous country stretching northward to the foot of Hudson Bay. The blizzard was roaring out of the North and we were heading into it. I saw, on what seemed like a dome-shaped hill perhaps a thousand feet above the river level, a small cluster of lights which marked Polter's property.

''Fly over it once, George,'' Alan said. ''Low—we can chance it. And find a place to land near the walls.''

We presently had it under us. I held the plane at five hundred feet, and cut our speed to the minimum of twenty miles an hour facing the gale, though it was sixty or seventy when we turned. There were a score or two of hooded ground lights. But there was little reflection aloft, and in the murk of the snowfall I felt we could escape notice.

We crossed, turned and went back in an arc following Polter's curved outer wall. We had a good view of it. A weird enough looking place, here on its lonely hilltop. No wonder the wealthy ''Frank Rascor'' had attained local prominence!

The whole property was irregularly circular, perhaps a mile in diameter covering the almost flat dome of the hilltop. Around it, completely enclosing it, Polter had built a stone and brick wall. A miniature of the Great Wall in China! We could see that it was fully thirty feet high with what evidently were naked high-voltage wires protecting its top. There were half a dozen little gates, securely barred, with doubtless a guard at each of them.

Within the walls there were several buildings: a few small stone houses suggesting workmen's dwellings; an oblong stone structure with smoke funnels which looked like a smelter; a huge domelike spread of translucent glass over what might have been the top of a mineshaft. It looked more like the dome of an observatory—an inverted bowl fully a hundred feet wide and equally as high, set upon the ground. What did it cover?

And there was Polter's residence—a castlelike brick and stone building with a tower not unlike a miniature of the Chateau Frontenac. We saw a stone corridor on the ground connecting the lower floor of the castle with the dome, which lay about a hundred feet to one side.

Could we chance landing inside the wall? There was a dark, level expanse of snow where we could have done it, but our descending plane doubtless would

have been discovered. But the mile-wide inner area was dark in many places. Spots of light were at the little wall-gates. There was a glow all along the top of the wall. Lights were on in Polter's house; they slanted out in yellow shafts to the nearby white ground. But for the rest, the whole place was dark, save a dim glow from under the dome.

I shook my head at Alan's suggestion that we land inside the walls. We had circled back and were a mile or so off toward the river. "The trees—and you saw guards down there. But that low stretch outside the gate on this side...."

A plan was coming to me. Heaven knows it was desperate enough, but we had no alternative. We would land and accost one of the gate guards. Force our way in. Once inside the wall, on foot in the darkness of this blizzard, we could hide; slip up to that dome. Beyond that my imagination could not go.

We landed in the snow a quarter of a mile from one of the gates. We left the plane and plunged into the darkness.

It was a steady upward slope. A packed snowfield was underfoot, firm enough to hold our weight, with a foot or so of loose, soft snow on its top. The falling flakes whirled around us. The darkness was solid. Our helmeted leather-furred flying suits were soon shapeless with a gathering white shroud. We carried our Essens in our gloved hands. The night was cold, around zero I imagine, though with that biting wind it felt far colder.

From the gloom a tiny spot of light loomed up.

"There it is, Alan. Easy now! Let me go first." The wind tore away my words. We could see the narrow rectangle of bars at the gate, with a glow of light behind them.

"Hide your gun, Alan." I gripped him. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Let me go first. I'll do the talking. When he opens the gate, let me handle him. You—if there are two of them—you take the other."

We emerged from the darkness, into the glow of light by the gate. I had the horrible feeling that a shot would greet us. A challenge came, at first in French and then in English.

"Stop! What do you want?"

"To see Mr. Rascor."

We were up to the bars now, shapeless hooded bundles of snow and frost. A man stood in the doorway of a lighted little cubby behind the bars. A black muzzle in his hand was leveled at us.

"He sees no one. Who are you?"

Alan was pressing at me from behind. I shoved him back, and took a step forward. I touched the bars.

"My name is Fred Davis. Newspaperman from Montreal I must see Mr. Rascor."

"You cannot. You may send in your call. The mouthpiece is there—out there to the left. Bare your face; he talks to no one without the face image."

The guard had drawn back into his cubby; there was only his extended hand and the muzzle of his weapon left visible.

I took a step forward. "I don't want to talk by phone. Won't you open the gate? It's cold out here. We have important business. We'll wait with you."

Abruptly the gate lattice slid aside. Beyond the cubby doorway was the open darkness within the wall. A scuffed path leading inward from the gate showed for a few feet.

I walked over the threshold, with Alan crowding me. The Essen in my coat pocket was leveled. But from the cubby doorway, I saw that the guard was gone! Then I saw him crouching behind a metal shield. His voice rang out.

"Stand!"

A light struck my face—a thin beam from a television sender beside me. It all happened in an instant, so quickly Alan and I had barely time to make a move. I realized my image was now doubtless being presented to Polter. He would recognize me!

I ducked my head, yelling, "Don't do that!"

It was too late! The guard had received a signal. I heard its buzz.

From the shield a tiny jet of fluid leapt at me. It struck my hood. There was a heavy sickening-sweet smell. It seemed like chloroform. I felt my senses going. The cubby room was turning dark, was roaring.

I think I fired at the shield. And Alan leapt aside. I heard the faint hiss of his Essen, and his choked, horrified voice:

"George, run! Don't fall!"

I crumpled; slid into blackness. And it seemed, as I went down, that Alan's inert body was falling on top of me....

* * * * *

I recovered after a nameless interval, a phantasmagoria of wild, drugged dreams. My senses came slowly. At first, there were dim muffled voices and the tread of footsteps. Then I knew that I was lying on the ground, and that I was indoors. It was warm. My overcoat was off. Then I realized that I was bound and gagged.

I opened my eyes. Alan was lying inert beside me, roped and with a black gag around his face and in his mouth. We were in a huge dim open space. Presently, as my vision cleared, I saw that the dome was overhead. This was a circular,

hundred-foot-wide room. It was dimly lighted. The figures of men were moving about, their great misshapen shadows shifting with them. Twenty feet from me there was a pile of golden rock—chunks of gold the size of a man's fist, or his head, and larger, heaped loosely into a mound ten feet high.

Beyond this pile of ore, near the center of the room, twenty feet above the concrete floor, there was a large hanging electrolier. It cast a circular glow downward. Under it I saw a low platform raised a foot or two above the ground. A giant electro-microscope was hung with its twenty foot cylinder above the platform. Its intensification tubes were glowing in a dim phosphorescent row on a nearby bracket. A man sat in a chair on the platform at the microscope's eyepiece.

I saw all this with a brief glance, then my attention went to a white stone slab under the giant lense. It rested on the platform floor, a two-foot square surface of smooth white marble. A little roped railing a few inches high fenced it. And in its center lay a fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut!

There was a movement across my line of vision. Two figures advanced. I recognized both of them. And I strained at my bonds; mouthed the gag with futile, frenzied effort. I could no more than writhe; and I couldn't make a sound. I lay, after a moment exhausted, and stared with horror.

The familiar hunched figure of Polter advanced toward the microscope. And with him, his huge hand holding her wrists, was Babs. They were nearly fifty feet from me, but with the light over them I could see them clearly. Babs' slim figure was clad in a long skirted dress—pale blue, now, with the light on it. Her long black hair had fallen disheveled to her shoulders. I couldn't see her face. She did not cry out. Polter was half dragging her as she resisted him; and then abruptly she ceased struggling.

I heard his guttural voice. "That iss better."

They mounted the platform. They were very small and seemed to be far away. I blinked. Horror surged over me. Their figures were dwindling as they stood there. Polter was saying something to the man at the microscope. Other men were nearby, watching. All were normal, save Polter and Babs. A moment passed. Polter was standing by the chair in which the man at the microscope was sitting. And Polter's head barely reached its seat! Babs was clinging to him now. Another moment and they were both tiny figures down by the chair-leg. Then they began walking with swaying steps toward the miniature railing of the white slab. The white reflection from the slab plainly illumined them. Polter's arm was around Babs. I had not realized how small they were until I saw Polter lift the rope of the little four-inch fence, and he and Babs stooped and walked under it. The fragment of quartz lay a foot from them in the center of the white surface. They walked unsteadily toward it. But soon they were running.

My horrified senses whirled. Then abruptly I felt something touch my face!

Alan and I were lying in shadow. No one had noticed my writhing movements, and Alan was still in drugged unconsciousness. Something tiny and light and soundless as a butterfly wing brushed my face! I jerked my head aside. On the floor, within six inches of my eyes, I saw the tiny figure of a girl an inch high! She stood, with a warning gesture to her lips—a human girl in a filmy flowing robe. Long, pale golden tresses lay on her white shoulders; her face, small as my little fingernail, colorful as a miniature painted on ivory, was so close to my eyes that I could see her expression—warning me not to move.

There was a faint glow of light on the floor where she stood, but in a moment she moved out of it. Then I felt her brush against the back of my head. My ear was near the ground. A tiny warm hand touched my ear lobe; clung to it. A tiny voice sounded in my ear.

"Please do not move your head. You might kill me!"

There was a pause. I held myself rigid. Then the tiny voice came again.

"I am Glora, a friend. I have the drug! I will help you!"

CHAPTER III

It seemed that Alan was stirring. I felt the tiny hand leave my ear. I thought that I could hear faint little footfalls as the girl scampered away, fearful that a sudden movement by Alan would crush her. I turned cautiously after a moment and saw Alan's eyes upon me. He too had seen, with a blurred returning consciousness, the dwindling figures of Babs and Polter. I followed his gaze. The while slab with the golden quartz under the microscope seemed empty. The several men in this huge circular dome-room were dispersing to their affairs; three of them sat whispering by what I now saw was a pile of gold ingots stacked crosswise. But the fellow at the microscope held his place, his eyes glued to its aperture as he watched the vanishing figures of Polter and Babs on the rock-fragment.

Alan was trying to convey something to me. He could only gaze and jerk his head. I saw behind his head the figures of the tiny girl on the floor behind him. She wanted evidently to approach his head, but didn't dare. When for an instant he was quiet, she ran forward, but at once scampered back.

From the group by the ingots, one of the men rose and came toward us. Alan held still, watching. And the girl, Glora, seized the opportunity to come nearer. We both heard her tiny voice:

"Do not move! Close your eyes! Make him think you are still unconscious."

Then she was gone, like a mouse hiding in the shadows near us.

Amazement swept Alan's face; he twisted, mouthed at his gag. But he saw my eager nod and took his cue from me.

I closed my eyes and lay stiff, breathing slowly. Footsteps approached. A

man bent over Alan and me.

"Are you no conscious yet?" It was the voice of a foreigner, with a queer, indescribable intonation. A foot prodded us. "Wake up!"

Then the footsteps retreated, and when I dared to look, the man was rejoining his fellows. It was a strange looking trio. They were heavy-set men in leather jackets and short, wide knee-length trousers. One wore tight, high boots, and the others a sort of white buckskin, with ankle straps. All were bare-headed—round, bullet heads of close-clipped black hair.

I suddenly had another startling realization. These men were not of normal size as I had assumed! They were eight or ten feet tall at the very least! And they and the pile of ingots, instead of being close to me, were more distant than I had thought.

Alan was trying to signal me. The tiny girl was again at his ear, whispering to him. And then she came to me.

"I have a knife. See?" She backed away. I caught the pinpoint gleam of what might have been a knife in her hand. "I will get a little larger. I am too small to cut your ropes. You lie still, even after I have cut them."

I nodded. The movement frightened her so that she leaped backward; but she came again, smiling. The three men were talking earnestly by the ingots. No one else was near us.

Glora's tiny voice was louder, so that we both could hear it at once.

"When I free you, do not move or they may see that you are loose. I get larger now—a little larger—and return."

She darted away and vanished. Alan and I lay listening to the voices of the three men. Two were talking in a strange tongue. One called to the man at the microscope, and he responded. The third man said suddenly:

"Say, talk English. You know damn well I can't understand that lingo."

"We say, McGuire, the two prisoners soon wake up."

"What we oughta do is kill 'em. Polter's a fool."

"The doctor say, wait for him return. Not long, what you call three, four hours."

"And have the Quebec police up here lookin' for 'em? An' that damn girl he stole off the Terrace. What did he call her, Barbara Kent?"

"These two who are drugged, their bodies can be thrown in a gully down behind St. Anne. That what the doctor plan to do, I think. Then the police find them—days maybe from now—and their smashed airship with them."

Gruesome suggestion!

The man at the microscope called, "They are almost gone I can hardly see them any more." He left the platform and joined the others. And I saw that he was

much smaller than they—about my own size possibly.

There seemed six men here altogether. Four now, by the ingots, and two others far across the room where I saw the dark entrance of the corridor-tunnel which led to Polter's castle.

Again I felt a warning hand touch my face, and saw the figure of Glora standing by my head. She was larger now—about a foot tall. She moved past my eyes; stood by my mouth; bent down over my gag. I felt the cautious slide of a tiny knife-blade inserted under the fabric of the gag. She hacked, tugged at it, and in a moment ripped it through.

She stood panting from the effort. My heart was pounding with fear that she would be seen; but the man had turned the central light off when he left the microscope, and it was far darker here now than before.

I moistened my dry mouth. My tongue was thick, but I could talk.

"Thank you, Glora."

"Quiet!"

I felt her hacking at the ropes around my wrists. And then at my ankles. It took her a long time, but at last I was free! I rubbed my arms and legs; felt the returning circulation in them.

And presently Alan was free. "George, what—" he began.

"Wait," I whispered. "Easy! Let her tell us what to do."

We were unarmed. Two, against these six, three of whom were giants.

Glora whispered, "Do not move! I have the drugs. But I can not give them to you when I am still so small. I have not enough. I will hide—there." Her little arm gestured to where, near us, half a dozen boxes were piled. "When I am large as you, I come back. Be ready, quickly to act. I may be seen. I give you then the drug."

"But wait," Alan whispered. "Tell us—"

"The drug to make you large. Large enough to fight these men. I had planned to do that myself, until I saw you held captive. That girl of your world the doctor just now steal, she is friend of yours?"

"Yes! But—" A thousand questions were springing in my mind, but this was no time to ask them. I amended, "Go on! Hurry! Give us the drug when you can."

The little figure moved away from us and disappeared. Alan and I lay as we had before. But now we could whisper. We tried to anticipate what would happen; tried to plan, but that was futile. The thing was too strange, too astoundingly fantastic.

How long Glora was gone I don't know. I think, not over three or four minutes. She came from her hiding place, crouching this time, and joined us. She was, probably, of normal Earth size—a small, frail-looking girl something over five feet

tall. We saw now that she was quite young, still in her teens. We lay staring at her, amazed at her beauty. Her small oval face was pale, with the flush of pink upon her cheeks—a face queerly, transcendingly beautiful. It was wholly human, yet somehow unearthly, as though unmarked by even the heritage of our Earthly strifes.

"Now! I am ready." She was fumbling at her robe. "I will give you each the same."

Her gestures were rapid. She flung a quick glance at the distant men. Alan and I were tense. We could easily be discovered now, but we had to chance it. We were sitting erect. Alan murmured:

"But what do we do? What happens? What—"

On the palm of her hand were two pink-white pellets. "Take these—one for each of you. Quickly!"

Involuntarily we drew back. The thing abruptly was gruesome, frightening. Horribly frightening.

"Quickly," she urged. "The drug is what you call highly radioactive. And volatile. Exposed to the air, it is gone very soon. You are afraid? No, I assure you it is not harmful."

With a muttered curse at his own reluctance, Alan seized the small pellet. I stopped him.

"Wait!"

The men momentarily were engaged in a low-voiced, earnest discussion. I dared to hesitate a moment longer.

"Glora, where will you be?"

"Here. Right here. I will hide."

"We want to go after Mr. Polter," I gestured. "Into the little piece of golden rock. That's where he went with the Earth girl, isn't it?"

"Yes. My world is there—within an atom there in that rock."

"Will you take us?"

"Yes! But later."

Alan whispered vehemently, "Why not now? We could get smaller, now."

But she shook her head. "That is not possible. We would be seen as we climbed the platform and crossed the white slab."

"No," I protested, "not if we get very small, hiding here first."

She was smiling, but urgently fearful of this delay. "Should we get that small, then it would be, from here"—she gestured toward the microscope—"to there, a journey of very many miles. Don't you understand?"

This thing so strange!

Alan was plucking at me. "Ready, George?"

"Yes."

I put the pellet on my tongue. It tasted slightly sweet, but seemed to melt quickly and I swallowed it hastily. My heart, was pounding, but that was apprehension, not the drug. A thrill of heat ran through my veins as though my blood were on fire.

Alan was clinging to me as we sat together. Glora again had vanished. In the background of my whirling consciousness the sudden thought hovered that she had tricked us; done to us something diabolical. But the thought was swept away in the confused flood of impressions upon me.

I turned dizzily. "You all right, Alan?"

"Yes, I—I guess so."

My ears were roaring, the room seemed whirling, but in a moment that passed. I felt a sudden growing sense of lightness. A humming was within me—a soundless tingle. The drug had gone to every tiny microscopic cell in my body. The myriad pores of my skin seemed thrilling with activity. I know now that it was the exuding volatile gas of this disintegrating drug. Like an aura it enveloped me, acted upon my garments.

I learned later much of the principles of this and its companion drug but I had no thought for such things now. The huge dimly illumined room under the dome was swaying. Then abruptly it steadied. The strange sensations within me were lessening, or I forgot them, and I became aware of externals.

The room was shrinking! As I stared, not with horror now, but with amazement and a coming triumph, I saw everywhere a slow, steady, crawling movement. The whole place was dwindling. The platform, the microscope, were nearer than before, and smaller. The pile of ingots, and men near there, were shifting toward me.

"George! My God—this is weird!"

I saw Alan's white face as I turned toward him. He was growing at the same rate as myself evidently, for in all the scene he only was unchanged.

We could feel the movement. The floor under us was shifting, crawling slowly. From all directions it contracted as though it was being squeezed beneath us. In reality our expanding bodies were pushing outward.

The pile of boxes which had been a few feet away, were thrusting themselves at me. I moved incautiously and knocked them over. They seemed small now, perhaps half their former size. Glora was standing behind them. I was sitting and she was standing, but across the litter our faces were level.

"Stand up!" she murmured. "You all right now. I hide!"

I struggled to my feet, drawing Alan up with me. Now! The time for action was upon us! We had already been discovered. The men were shouting, clam-

bering to their feet. Alan and I stood swaying. The dome-room had contracted to half its former size. Near us was a little platform, chair and microscope. Small figures of men were rushing at us.

I shouted, "Alan! Watch yourself!"

We were unarmed. These men might have automatic weapons. But evidently they did not. Only knives were in their hands. The whole place was ringing with shouts. And then a shrill siren alarm from outside started clanging.

The first of the men—a few moments before he had seemed a giant—flung himself upon me. His head was lower than my shoulders. I met him with a blow of my fist in his face. He toppled backward; but from one side another figure came at me. A knife-blade bit into the flesh of my thigh.

The pain seemed to fire my brain. A madness descended upon me. It was the madness of abnormality. I saw Alan with two dwarfed figures clinging to him. But he threw them off, and they turned and ran.

The man at my thigh stabbed again, but I caught his wrist and, as though he were a child, whirled him around me and flung him away. He landed with a crash against the shrunken pile of gold nuggets and lay still.

The place was in a turmoil. Other men were appearing from outside. But they now stood well away from us. Alan backed against me. His laugh rang out, half hysterical with the madness upon him as it was upon me.

"God! George, look at them! So small!"

They were now hardly the height of our knees. This was now a small circular room, under a lowering concave dome. A shot came from the group of Pygmy figures. I saw the small stab of flame, heard the zing of the bullet.

We rushed, with the full frenzy of madness upon us—enraged giants. What actually happened I cannot recount. I recall scattering the little figures; seizing them; flinging them headlong. A bullet, tiny now, stung the calf of my leg. Little chairs and tables under my feet were crashing. Alan was lunging back and forth; stamping; flinging his tiny adversaries away.

There were twenty or thirty of the figures here now. I feared that they might produce more up-to-date weapons. But my fears were unfounded: soon I saw these figures making their escape.

The room was littered with wreckage. I saw that by some miracle of chance the microscope was still standing, and I had a moment of sanity.

"Alan! Watch out! The microscope—the platform! Don't smash them! And Glora be careful not to hurt her!"

I suddenly became aware that my head and my shoulders had struck the dome roof. Why, this was a tiny room! Alan and I found ourselves backed together, panting in the small confines of a circular cubby with an arching dome close over

us. At our feet the platform with the microscope over it hardly reached our boot tops. There was a sudden silence, broken only by our heavy breathing. The tiny forms of humans strewn around us were all motionless. The others had fled.

Then we heard a small voice. "Here! Take this! Quickly! You are too large. Quickly!"

Alan took a step. And sudden panic was on us both. Glora was here at our feet. We did not dare turn; hardly dared to move. To change position might have crushed her now that she had left her hiding place. My leg hit the top of the microscope cylinder. It rocked but did not fall.

Where was Glora? In the gloom we could not see her. We were in a panic.

Alan began, "George, I—"

The contracting inner curve of the dome bumped gently against my head. Our panic and confusion turned into cold fear. The room was closing in to crush us.

I muttered, "Alan! I'm going out!" I braced myself and heaved against the side and top curve of the dome. Its metal ribs and heavy translucent, reinforced glass plates resisted me. There was an instant when Alan and I were desperately frightened. We were trapped, to be crushed in here by our own horrible growth. Then the dome yielded under our smashing blows. The ribs bent; the plates cracked.

We straightened, pushed upward and emerged through the broken dome, with head and shoulders towering into the outside darkness and the wind and snow of the blizzard howling around us.

CHAPTER IV

"Glora—that was horrible!"

We stood, again in normal size, with the wrecked dome-laboratory around us. The dome had a great jagged hole halfway up one of its sides, through which the snow was falling. The broken bodies strewn around were gruesome.

Alan repeated, "Horrible, Glora. The power of this drug is diabolical."

Glora had grown large after us and had given us the companion drug. I need not detail the strange sensations of our dwindling. We were so soon to experience them again!

We had searched, when still large, all of Polter's grounds. Some of his men undoubtedly escaped, made off into the blizzard. How many, we never knew. None of them ever made themselves known again.

We were ready to start into the atom. The fragment of golden quartz still lay under the microscope on the white square of stone slab. We had hurried with our last preparations. The room was chilling. We were all inadequately dressed for

such cold.

I left a note scribbled on a square of paper by the microscope. With daylight Polter's wrecked place would be discovered and the police would surely come.

Guard this piece of golden quartz. Take it at once, very carefully, to the Royal Canadian Scientific Society. Have it watched day and night. We will return.

I signed it George Randolph. And as I did so, the extra ordinary aspect of these events swept me anew. Here in Polter's weird place I had been living in some strange fantastic realm. But this was the Province of Quebec, in civilized Canada. These were the Quebec authorities I was addressing.

I flung the thoughts away. "Ready, Glora?"

"Yes."

Then doubts assailed me. None of Polter's men had gotten large enough to fight us. Evidently he did not trust them with the drug. We could well believe that, for the thing misused, was diabolical beyond human conception. A single giant, a criminal, a madman, by the power of giant size alone, could menace and destroy beyond belief. The drug lost, or carelessly handled, could get loose. Animals, insects eating it, could roam the Earth, gigantic monsters. Vegetation nourished with the drug, might in a day overrun a big city, burying it with jungle growth!

How terrible a thing, if the realm of smallness were suddenly to emerge, consume this awe inspiring drug! Monsters of the sea, marine organisms, could expand until even the ocean was too small for them. Microbes of disease, feeding upon it—

Alan was prodding me. "We're ready, George."

"Okay, let's go."

This was not the largeness we were facing now, but smallness. I thought of Babs, down there with Polter, beyond the vanishing point in the realm of infinitely small. They had been gone an hour at least. Every moment lost now was adding to Babs' danger.

Glora sat with us on the platform. Strange little creature! She was wholly calm now; methodical with her last directions. There had been no time for her to tell us anything about herself. Alan had asked her why she had come here and how she had gotten the drugs. She waved him away.

"On the way down. Plenty of time then."

"How long will it take us?" Alan demanded.

"Not too long if we are careful with managing the trip. About ten hours."

And now we were ready to start. She told us calmly:

"I will give you each your share of the drugs, but then you take only as I tell you."

She produced from her robe several small vials a few inches long. They were tightly stoppered. The feel of them was cool and sleek; they seemed to be made of some strange, polished metal. Some of them were tinted black while the others glowed opalescent. She gave each of us one vial of each kind.

"The light ones are for diminishing," she said. "We take them very carefully, one small pellet only at first."

Alan was opening one of his, but she checked him.

"Wait! The drug evaporates very quickly. I have more to say. First we sit here together. Then you follow me to the white slab. We climb upon the little rock."

She laid her hands on my arms. Her blue eyes regarded us earnestly. Her manner was naive; childlike. But I could not mistake her intelligence or the force of character stamped on her face for all its dainty, ethereal beauty.

"Alan—" She smiled at him, and tossed back a straying lock of her hair which was annoying her. "You pay attention, Alan. You are very young, reckless. You listen. We must not be separated. You understand that, both of you? We will be always in that little piece of rock. But there will be miles of distance. And to be lost in size—"

What a strange journey upon which we were now starting! Lost in size?

"You understand me? Lost in size. If that happens, we might never find each other. And if we come upon the Doctor Polter and the girl he holds captive—if we can overtake them—"

"We must!" I exclaimed. "And we must get started."

She showed us which pellet to select. They were of several sizes, I found. And as she afterward told us, the larger ones were not only larger but of an intensified strength. We took the smallest. It was barely a thousandth part of the strength of the largest. In unison we placed the pellets on our tongues, and hastily swallowed.

The first sensations were as before. And, familiar now, they caused no more than a fleeting discomfort. But I think I could never get used to the outward strangeness!

The room in a moment was expanding. I could feel the platform floor crawling outward beneath me, so that I had to hitch and change my position as it pulled. We were seated together, Alan and I on each side of Glora. My fingers were on her arm. It did not change size, but it slowly drew away with a space opening between us. Overhead, the dome roof, the great jagged hole there, was receding, lifting, moving upward and away.

Glora pulled us to our feet. "We had better start now. The distance grows very far, so quickly."

We had been sitting within five feet of the stone slab with its four inch high

railing around it. A chair was by the microscope eyepiece. As we stood swaying I saw that the chair was huge, and its seat level with my head. The great barrel-cylinder of the microscope slanted sixty feet upward. The dome roof was a distant spread three hundred feet up in the dimness. The dome-room was a vast arena now.

Alan and I must have hesitated, confused by the expanding scene—a slow, steady movement everywhere. Everything was drawing away from us. Even as we stood together, the creeping platform floor was separating us.

A moment passed. Glora was urging us on vehemently:

"Come! You must not stand there!"

We started walking. The railing around the slab was knee-high. The slab itself was a broad, square surface. The fragment of golden quartz lay in its center. It was now a jagged lump nearly a foot in diameter.

The platform seemed to shift as we walked; the railing hardly came closer as we advanced toward it. Then suddenly I realized that it was receding. Thirty feet away? No, now it was more than that—a great, thick rope, waist-high, with a huge spread of white surface behind it.

"Faster!" urged Glora. We ran, and reached the railing. It was higher than our heads. We ran under it, and cut out upon the white slab—a level surface, larger now than the whole dome-room had been.

Glora, like a fawn, ran in advance of us, her robe flying in the wind. She turned to look back.

"Faster! Faster, or it will be too hard a climb!"

Ahead lay a golden mound of rock. It was widening; raising its top steadily higher. Beyond it and over it was a vast dim distance. We reached the rock, breathless, winded. It was a jagged mound like a great fifty-foot butte. We plunged upon it and began climbing.

The ascent was steep; precipitous in places. There were little gullies, which expanded as we climbed up them. It seemed as if we would never reach the top, but at last we were there. I was aware that the drug had ceased its action. The yellow, rocky ground was no longer expanding.

We came to the summit and stood to get back our breath. Alan and I gazed with awe upon the top of a rocky hill. Little buttes and strewn boulders lay everywhere. It was all naked rock, ridged and pitted, and everywhere yellow-tinged.

Overhead was distance. I could not call it a sky. A blur was there—something almost but not quite distinguishable. Then I thought that I could make out a more solid blur which might be the lower lens of the microscope above us. And there were blurred, very distant spots of light, like huge suns masked by a haze, and I knew that they were the hooded lights of the laboratory room.

Before us, over the brink of a five hundred-foot drop, a great glistening plain stretched into the distance. I seemed to see where it ended in a murky blur. And far higher than our hilltop level a horizontal streak marked the rope railing of the slab.

"Well," said Alan. "We're here." He gazed behind us, back across the rocky summit which seemed several hundred feet across to its opposite brink. He was smiling, but the smile faded. "Now what, Glora? Another pellet?"

"No. Not yet. There is a place where we go down. It is marked in my mind."

I had a sudden ominous sense that we three were not alone up here. Glora led us back from the cliff. As we picked our way among the naked crags, it seemed behind each of them an enemy might be lurking.

"Glora, do you know if any of Dr. Polter's men might have the drug? I mean, do they come in and out of here?"

She shook her head. "I think not. He lets no one have the drug. He trusts not anyone. I stole it. I will tell you later. Much I have to tell you before we arrive."

Alan made a sudden, sidewise leap, and dashed around a rock. He came back to us, smiling ruefully.

"Gets on your nerves, all of this. I had the same idea you had, George. Might be someone around here. But I guess not." He took Glora's hand and they walked in advance of me. "We haven't thanked you yet, Glora," he added.

"Not needed. I came for help from your world. I followed the Dr. Polter when he came outward. He has made my world and my people, his slaves. I came for help. And because I have helped you, needs no thanks."

"But we do thank you, Glora." Alan turned his flushed, earnest face back to me. I thought I had never seen him so handsome, with his boyish, rugged features and shock of tousled brown hair. The grimness of adventure was upon him, but in his eyes there was something else. It was not for me to see it. That was for Glora; and I think that even then its presence and its meaning did not escape her.

We reached a little gully near the center of the hilltop. It was some twenty feet deep.

Glora paused. "We descend here."

The gully was an unmistakable landmark—open at one end, forty feet long, with the other end terminating in a blind wall which now loomed above us.

"A pit is here—a hole. I cannot tell just how large it will look when we are in this size."

We found it and stood over it—a foot-wide circular hole extending downward. Alan knelt and shoved his hand and arm into it, but Glora sprang at him.

"Don't do that!"

"Why not? How deep is it?"

She retorted sharply, "The Doctor Polter is ahead of us. How far away in size, who knows? Do you want to crush him, and crush that young girl with him?"

Alan's jaw dropped. "Good Lord!"

We stood with the little pit before us, and another of the pellets ready.

"Now!" said Glora.

Again we took the drug, a somewhat larger pellet this time. The familiar sensations began. Everywhere the rocks were creeping with a slow inexorable movement, the landscape expanding around us. The gully walls drew back and upward. In a moment they were cliff walls and we were in a broad valley.

We had been standing close together. We had not moved, except to shift our feet as the expanding ground drew them apart. I became aware that Alan and Glora were a distance from me. Glora called:

"Come, George! We're going down—quickly now."

We ran to the pit. It had expanded to a great round hole some six feet wide and equally as deep. Glora let herself down, peered anxiously beneath her, and dropped. Alan and I followed. We jammed the pit; but as we stood there, the walls were receding and lifting.

I had remarked Glora's downward glance, and shuddered. Suppose, in some slightly smaller size, Babs had been among these rocks!

The pit widened steadily. The movement was far swifter now. We stood presently in a great circular valley. It seemed fully a mile in diameter, with huge encircling walls like a crater rim towering thousands of feet into the air. We ran along the base of one expanding wall, following Glora.

I noticed now that overhead the turgid murk had turned into the blue of distance. A sky. It was faintly sky-blue, and seemed hazy, almost as though clouds were forming. It had been cold when we started. The exertion had kept us fairly comfortable; But now I realized that it was far warmer. This was different air, more humid, and I thought the smell of moist earth was in it. Rocks and boulders were strewn here on the floor of this giant valley, and I saw occasional pools of water. There had been rain recently!

The realization came with a shock of surprise. This was a new world! A faint, luminous twilight was around us. And then I noticed that the light was not altogether coming from overhead. It seemed inherent to the rocks themselves. They glowed, very faintly luminous, as though phosphorescent.

We were now well embarked upon this strange journey. We seldom spoke. Glora was intent upon guiding us. She was trying to make the best possible speed. I realized that it was a case of judgment, as well as physical haste. We had dropped into that six-foot pit. Had we waited a few moments longer, the depth would have been a hundred feet, two hundred, a thousand! It would have involved hours of

arduous descent—if we had lingered until we were a trifle smaller!

We took other pellets. We traveled perhaps an hour more. There were many instances of Glora's skill. We squeezed into a gully and waited until it widened; we leapt over expanding caverns; we slid down a smooth yellowish slide of rocks, and saw it behind and over us, rising to become a great spreading ramp extending upward into the blue of the sky. Now, up there, little sailing white clouds were visible. And down where we stood it was deep twilight, queerly silvery with the dim light from the luminous rocks, as though some hidden moon were shining.

Strange, new world! I suddenly envisaged the full strangeness of it. Around me were spreading miles of barren, naked landscape. I gazed off to where, across the rugged plateau we were traversing, there was a range of hills. Behind and above them were mountains; serrated tiers; higher and more distant. An infinite spread of landscape! And, as we dwindled, still other vast reaches opened before us. I gazed overhead. Was it—compared to my stature now—a thousand miles, perhaps even a million miles up to where we had been two or three hours ago? I thought so.

Then suddenly I caught the other viewpoint. This was all only an inch of golden quartz—if one were large enough to see it that way!

Alan had been trying to memorize the main topographical features of our route. It was not as difficult as it seemed at first. We were always far larger than normal in comparison to our environment, and the main distinguishing characteristics of the landscape were obvious—the blind gully, with the round pit, for instance, or the ramp slide.

We had been traveling some three or four hours when Glora suggested a rest. We were at the edge of a broad canyon. The wall towered several hundred feet above us; but a few moments before, we had jumped down it with a single leap!

The last pellet we had taken had ceased its action. We sat down to rest. It was a wild, mountainous scene around us, deep with luminous gloom. We could barely see across the canyon to its distant cliff wall. The wall beside us had been smooth, but now it was broken and ridged. There were ravines in it, and dark holes resembling cave-mouths. One was near us. Alan gazed at it apprehensively.

"I say, Glora, I don't like sitting here."

I had been telling her all we knew of Polter. She listened quietly, seldom interrupting me. Then she said:

"I understand. I tell you now about Polter as I have seen him."

She talked for five or ten minutes. I listened, amazed, awed by what she said.

But Alan's insistence interrupted her. "Come on, let's get out of here. That tunnel-mouth, or cave, or whatever it is—"

"But we go in there," she protested. "A little tunnel. That is our way to travel. We are not far from my city now."

Perhaps Alan felt what once was called a hunch, a premonition, the presage of evil which I think comes strangely to us more often than we realize. Whatever it was, we had no time to act upon it. The tunnel-mouth which had caused Alan's apprehension was about a hundred feet away. It was a ten-foot, yawning hole in the cliff. Perhaps Alan sensed a movement in there. As I turned to look at it a great, hairy human arm came out of the opening! Then a shoulder! A head!

The giant figure of a man came squeezing through the hole on his hands and knees! He gathered himself, and as he stood erect, I saw that he was growing in size! Already he was twenty feet tall compared to us—a thick-set fellow, dressed in leather garments, his legs and arms heavily matted with black hair. He stood swaying, gazing around him. I stared up at his round bullet head, his villainous face.

He saw us! Stupid amazement struck him, then comprehension.

He let out a roar and came at us!

CHAPTER V

Glora shouted, "Into the tunnel! This way!" She held her wits and darted to one side, with Alan and me after her. We ran through a narrow passage between two fifty-foot boulders which lay close together. Momentarily the giant was out of sight, but we could hear his heavy tread and panting breath. We emerged having passed him. He was taller now. He seemed confused at our sudden scampering activity. He checked his forward rush, and ran around the twin boulders. But we had squeezed into a narrow ravine. He could not follow. He threw a rock. To us it was a boulder. It crashed behind us. To him, we were like scampering insects; he could not tell which way we were about to dart.

Alan panted, "Glora, does this lead out?"

The little ravine seemed to open fifty feet ahead of us. Alan stopped, seized a chunk of rock, flung it up. I saw the giant's face above us. He was kneeling to reach in. The rock hit him on the forehead—a pebble, but it stung him. His face rose away.

Again we emerged. The tunnel-mouth was near us. We reached it and flung ourselves into its ten-foot width just as the giant came lunging up. He was far larger than before. Looking back, I could see only the lower part of his legs blocked against the outer light.

"Glora! Alan, where are you?"

For a moment I did not see them. It was darker in this tunnel of broken rocky walls, and jagged arching roof than outside.

Then I heard Alan's voice: "George! Over here!"

They came running to me. For a moment we stood, undecided. My eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom. The tunnel was illumined by a dim phosphorescence from the rocks. I saw Alan fumbling for his vials, but Glora stopped him.

"No. We are the right size."

We were about a hundred feet back from the opening. The giant's legs disappeared. But in a moment the round, light hole of the exit was obscured again. His head and shoulders! He was lying prone. His great arms came in. He hitched forward. The width of his expanding shoulders wedged.

I think that he expected to reach us with a single snatch of his tremendous arms. Or perhaps he was confused, or forgot his growth. He did not reach us. His shoulders stuck. Then suddenly he was trying to back out, but could not!

It was only a moment. We stood in the radiant gloom of the tunnel, confused and frightened. The giant's voice roared, reverberating around us. Anger. A note of fear. Finally stark terror. He heaved, but the rocks of the opening held solid. Then there was a crack, a gruesome rattling, splintering—his shoulder bones breaking. His whole gigantic body gave a last convulsive lunge, and he emitted a deafening shrill scream of agony.

I was aware of the tunnel-mouth breaking upward. Falling rocks—an avalanche, a cataclysm around us. Then light overhead.

The giant's crushed body lay motionless. A pile of boulders, rocks and loose metallic earth was strewn upon his head and torso, illumined by the outer light through a jagged rent where the cliff-face had fallen down.

We were unhurt, crouching back from the avalanche. The giant's mangled body was still expanding; shoving at the litter of loose rocks. In a moment it would again be too small for the broken cliff opening.

I found my wits. "Alan, we've got to get out of here. God—don't you see what's happening?"

But Glora restrained us. She realized that the effect of the drug the giant had taken was about at its end. The growth presently stopped. That huge noisome mass of pulp which once had been human shoulders no longer expanded.

I shoved Glora away. "Don't look!" I was shaking; my head was reeling. Alan's face, painted by the phosphorescence, was ghastly.

Glora pulled at us. "This way! The tunnel is not too long. We go."

But the giant had drugs, and perhaps weapons. "Wait!" I urged. "You two wait here. I'll climb over him."

I told them why, and ran. I can only leave to the imagination that brief exploratory climb. The broken body seemed at least a hundred feet long; the

mangled shoulders and chest filled the great torn hole in the cliff. I climbed over the litter. Indescribable, horrible scene! A river of warm blood was flowing down the declivity outward....

I came back to Glora and Alan. Under my arm was a huge cylinder vial. It was black, the enlarging drug. I set it down. They stared at me in my bloodstained garments.

"George! You're—"

"His blood, not mine." I tried to smile. "Here's the drug he carried. Evidently Polter was only sending him out because I found just the one drug."

"What'll we do with it?" Alan demanded. "Look at the size of it!"

"Destroy it," said Glora. "See, that is not difficult." She tugged at the huge stopper, and exposed a few of the pellets—to us as large as apples. "The air will soon spoil it."

We left it in the tunnel. I also had with me a great roll of paper which had been folded in the giant's belt, with the drug cylinder. We unrolled it, and hauled its folds to a spread some ten feet long. It was covered with a scrawled handwriting in pencil, but its giant characters seemed thick blurred strokes of charcoal. We could not read it; we were too close. Alan and Glora held it up against the tunnel wall. From a distance I could make it out. It was a note written in English, signed "Polter," evidently to one of his men.

It read:

The two prisoners, kill them at once. That is better. It will be too dangerous to wait for my return. Put their bodies with their airplane. Crash it a mile from my gate.

Full directions for our death followed. And Polter said he would return by dawn or soon after.

That gave me a start. By dawn! We had been traveling four or five hours. It was already dawn up there now!

"No," Glora explained, "the time in here is different. A different time-rate. I do not know how much difference. My world speeds faster; yours is very slow. It is not the dawn up there quite yet."

Again my mind strove to encompass these things—so strange. A faster time-rate prevailed in here? Then our lives were passing more quickly. We were living, experiencing things, compressed into a shorter interval. It was not apparent: there was nothing to which comparison could be made. I recalled Alan's description of Polter—not thirty years old as he should have been, but nearer fifty. I could understand that, now. A day in here was equal to only a few hours on our gigantic world outside.

We walked the length of the tunnel. I suppose it was a quarter of a mile, to us in this size. It wound through the cliff with a steady downward slope. And sud-

denly I realized that we had turned downward nearly half the diameter of a circle! We had turned over—or at least it seemed so. But the gravity was the same. I had noticed from the beginning very little change.

The realization of this tunnel brought a mental confusion. I lost all sense of direction. The outer world of Earth was under my feet, instead of overhead. Then we went level. I forgot the confusion: this was normality here. We turned upward a little. Cross tunnels intersected ours at intervals. I saw caverns, open, widened tunnels, as though this mountain were honeycombed.

"Look!" said Glora. "There is the way out. All these passages lead the same way."

There was a glow of light ahead. I recall that I was at that moment fumbling at my belt in two small compartments in which I was carrying the two vials of the drugs which Glora had given me. Alan wore the same sort of belt. We had found them in the wrecked dome-room. I heard a click on the ground at my feet. I was about to stoop to see what I had kicked—only a loose stone, perhaps—but Glora's words distracted me. I did not stoop. If only I had, how different events might have been!

The glow of light ahead of us widened as we approached, and presently we stood at the end of the tunnel. A spread of open distance was outside. We were on a ledge of a steep rocky wall some fifty feet above a wide level landscape. Vegetation! I saw trees—a forest off to the left. A range of naked hills lay behind it. A mile away, in front and to the right, a little town nestled on the shore of shining water. There was starlight on the water! And over it a vast blue-purple sky was studded with stars.

I gazed, with that first sudden shock of emotion, into the infinite depths of interplanetary space! Light years of distance. Gigantic worlds, blazing suns off there shrunken by distance now to little points of light. A universe was here!

But this was an inch of golden quartz!

Above my head were stars which, compared to my bodily size now, were vast worlds ten thousand light-years away! Yet, from the other viewpoint, I had only descended perhaps an eighth, or a quarter of an inch, beneath the broken pitted surface of a little fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut—into just one of its myriads of golden atoms!

CHAPTER VI

"My world," Glora was saying. "You like it? See the starlight on the lake? I have heard that your world looks like this at night, in summer. Ours is always like this. No day, no night. Just like this—starlight." Her hand went to Alan's shoulder. "You like it? My world?"

"Yes, Glora. It's very beautiful."

There was a sheen on everything, a soft, glowing sheen of phosphorescence from the rocks rising to meet the pale wan starlight. The night air was soft, with a gentle breeze that rippled the distant lake into a great spread of gold and silver light.

The city was called Orena. I saw at once that we were about normal size in relation to its houses and people. There were fields beneath our ledge, with farm implements lying in them; no workers, for this was the time for sleep. Ribbons of roads wound over the country, pale streamers in the starlight.

Glora gestured, "The giants are on their island. Everyone sleeps now. You see the island off there?"

Beyond the city, over the low stone roofs of its flat-topped dwellings, the silver spread of lake showed a green-clad island some three miles off shore. The distance made its white stone houses seem small. But as I gazed, I realized that they were large compared to their environment, all far larger than those of the little town. The island was perhaps a mile in length. Between it and the mainland a boat was coming toward us. It was a dark blob of hull on the shining water, and above it a queerly shaped circular sail was puffed out, like a balloon parachute, by the wind.

"The giants live there?" said Alan. "You mean Polter's men?"

"And women. Yes."

"Are there many giants?"

"No."

"How many?" I put in. "How large are they? In relation to us now, I mean. And to your normal size?"

"You ask so many questions so fast, George. There are two hundred or more of the giants. And there are more than that many thousands of our people, here. Slaves, because the giants are four times as large. This little city, these fields, these hills of stone and metal, all this was ours to have in peace and happiness until your Polter came."

She gestured. "Everywhere is a great reach of desert and forest. There are insects, but no wild beasts—nothing to harm us. Nature is kind here. The weather is always like this. We were happy, until Polter came."

"And only a few thousand people," Alan said. "No other cities?"

"What lies off in the great distance, we do not know. Our nation is ten times what is here. We have a few other cities, and some of our people live in the forests."

She broke off. "That boat is coming for Polter. He is in the city no doubt of that. The boat will take him and that girl you call Babs, to the giant's island. His castle is there."

I turned to Alan. "They must have arrived only recently. Before we go any further we have to decide what size to be. We can't be gigantic because I'm sure he'd kill Babs if he sees us. We've got to plan!"

If we could get on that boat and go with him to the island—But in what size? Very small? But then, if we were very small it would take us hours to get from here to the boat. Glora pointed out where it would land—just beyond the village where the houses were set in a sparse fringe. It would be there, apparently, in ten or fifteen minutes. Polter probably was there now with Babs, waiting for it.

In our present size we could not get there in time. It was two or three miles at least. But a trifle larger—the size of one of Polter's giants—we would be able to make it. We would be seen, but in the pale starlight, keeping away from the city as much as possible, we might only be mistaken for Polter's people. And when we got closer we would diminish our size, creep into the boat, get near Babs and Polter and then plan what to do.

We climbed down from the ledge and stood at the base of the towering cliff which reared its jagged wall against the stars. A field and a road were near us. The road seemed of normal size. A man was in the field. He was apparently about my height. He presently discarded his work, walked away from us and vanished.

"Hurry, Glora." Alan and I stood beside her while she took pellets from her vials. We wanted our stature now to be four times what it was. Glora gave us pellets of both drugs, one of which was slightly more intense than the other.

"Polter made them this way," she said. "The two taken at once give just the growth to take us from this normal size to the stature of the giants."

Alan and I did not touch our own vials. We had used none of our enlarging drug upon the journey, and the supply she had given us of the other was almost gone.

As I took these pellets which Glora now gave us, standing there by the side of that road, I recall that I was struck with the realization that never once upon this journey had I conceived myself to be other than normal stature. I am normally about six feet tall. I still felt—there in that golden atom—the same height. This landscape seemed of normal size. There were trees nearby—spreading, fantastic-looking growths with great strings of pods hanging from them. But still—as I looked up to see one arching over me with its blue-brown leaves and an air-vine carrying vivid yellow blossoms—whatever the size of the tree, I could only conceive of myself as a normal man of six-foot stature standing beneath it. The human ego always supreme! Around each man's consciousness of himself the entire universe revolves.

We crouched on the ground when this growth now began; it would not do to be observed changing size. Polter's giants never did that. Years before, he had made them large—his few hundred men and women. They were, Glora said,

people both of this realm and from our great world above—dissolute criminal characters who had now set themselves up here as the nucleus of a ruling race.

In a moment now, we were the size of these giants. Twenty to twenty-five feet tall, in relation to the environment. But I did not feel so. As I stood up—still feeling myself in normal stature—I saw around me a shrunken little landscape. The trees, as though in a Japanese garden, were about my own height; the road was a smooth, level path; the little field near us had a toy fence around it. On another road nearby a man was walking. In height he would barely have reached my knees. He saw us rise beside the trees. He darted off in alarm, and disappeared.

I have taken longer to tell all this than the actual time which passed. We could see the boat coming from the island, and it was still a fair distance off shore. We ran along the road, skirting the edge of the little town. None of its houses were taller than ourselves. The windows and doorways were ovals into which we could only have inserted a head or an arm. Most of them were dark. Little people occasionally stared out, saw us run past, and ducked back, thankful that we did not stop to harass them.

"This way," said Glora. She ran like a faun, hardly winded, with Alan and me heavily panting behind her. "There are trees—thick trees—quite near where the boat lands. We can get in them and hide and change our size to smallness. But hurry, for we shall need a great deal of time when we are small!"

The little spread of town and the shining lake remained always to our right. In five minutes we were past most of the houses. A patch of woods, with thick, interlacing treetops about our own height, lay ahead. It extended a few hundred feet over to the lake shore. The sailboat was heading in close. There was a broad starlit roadway at the edge of the lake, and a dock at which the boat was preparing to land.

Would we be in time? I suddenly feared not. To get small now, with distance lengthening between us and the boat, would be disastrous. And where was Polter?

Abruptly we saw him. There had been only little people visible to us: none of our own height. The lake roadway by the dock was brightly starlit. As we approached the intervening patch of woods it seemed that a crowd of little people were near the dock. Polter must have been sitting. But now he rose up. We could not mistake his thick hunched figure, the lump on his shoulders clear in the starlight with the gleaming lake as a background. The crowd of little figures were milling around his knees. In the silence of the night the murmur of their voices floated over to us.

"There he is!" Alan gasped. We all three checked our running; we were at the edge of the patch of woods. "By God, there he is! Let's get larger and rush him! He's only a few hundred feet away!"

But Babs? Where was Babs?

"Alan, get down!" I crouched, pulling Alan and Glora with me. "Don't let him see us! We can't rush him Alan, 'til we find Babs. He'd see us coming and kill her."

Of all the strange events that had been flung at us, I think this sudden crisis now most confused Alan and me.... To get larger, or smaller? Which? Yet something had to be done at once.

Glora said, "We can get through the woods best in this size. We won't be seen and will be closer to the landing."

We crouched so that the treetops were always well over us. The patch of woods was dark. A soil of black loam was under us, a thick soft underbrush reached our knees, and lacy, flexible leaves and branches were about shoulder height. We pushed them aside, forcing our way softly forward. It was not far. The little murmuring voices of the crowd grew louder.

Presently we were crouching at the other edge of the woods. I softly shoved the tree branches aside until we could all three get a clear view of the strange scene now directly before us.

And I saw a toy dock, at which a twenty-foot, bargelike open sailboat was landing; a narrow starlit roadway, crowded with a milling throng of people all no more than a foot and a half in height. The crowd milled almost to where we were crouching, unseen in the shrubbery.

Across the road by the dock, Polter stood with the crowd down around his knees. In height he seemed the old familiar Polter. Bareheaded, with his shaggy black hair shot with white. He was dressed in Earth fashion: narrow black evening trousers and a white shirt and collar with flowing black tie. I saw at once what Alan had noticed—the change in him. An abnormality of age. I would have called him now forty, or older. Beyond even that there was an abnormality. A man old before his time; or younger than he should have been for the years he had lived. An indescribable mingling of something of the two worlds, perhaps. It marked him with a look at once unnatural and sinister.

These were instant impressions. Glora was plucking at me. "On the white chest of his shirt, something is there."

Polter was coatless, with snowy white shirt and cuffs to his thick wrists. He was no more than fifty feet from us. On his shirt bosom something golden in color was hanging like a large bauble, an ornament, an insignia. It was strapped tightly there with a band about his chest, a cord, like a necklace chain, up to his thick hunched neck, and other chains down to his belt.

I stared at it. An ornament, like a cube held flat against his shirt front—a little golden cube, ornate with tiny bars.

I heard Alan murmuring, "A cage! Why George, it's—"

And then, simultaneously, realization struck me. It was a golden cage strapped there. And I seemed to see that there was something in it. A tiny figure? Babs!

"I think he has her there," Glora murmured. "You see the little box with bars? The girl, Babs, is a prisoner in there." She spoke swiftly, vehemently. "He will take the boat to the island."

She gripped us. "You think it really best to go? I do what you say. I had the wish to get to my father with these drugs."

"No!" exclaimed Alan. "We must keep close to Polter!"

We were ready with our pellets. But a sudden activity in the road made us pause. The crowd of little people were hostile to Polter. A sullen hostility. They milled about him as he stood there, gazing down at them sardonically.

And abruptly he shouted at them in English. "You speak my language, some of you. Then listen!"

The crowd fell silent.

"Listen. This iss your future Queen. Can you see her? She iss small now. But she has the magic power. Soon she will be large, like me."

The crowd was shouting again. It surged forward, but it lacked a leader, and those in advance shoved backward in fear.

Polter spoke again. "This girl from my world, you will like her. She iss kind and very beautiful. When she iss large, you will see how beautiful."

A small stone suddenly came up from the throng of little people and struck Polter on the shoulder. Then another. The crowd, emboldened, made a rush: surged against his legs.

He shouted, "You do that? Why, how dare you? I show you what giants do when you make dem angry!"

From down by his knees he plucked the small figure of a man. The crowd scattered with shouts of terror. Polter had the struggling eighteen-inch figure by the wrist. He whirled it around his head like a ninepin and flung it over the canopy of the dock far out into the shimmering lake!

CHAPTER VII

The trees around us expanded to towering forest giants. The underbrush rose up over our heads. We had taken a taste of the diminishing drug. Glora showed us how to touch it to our tongue several times, to adjust our size as we became smaller. It took us no more than a minute to diminish. We could hear the roar of the crowd, and Polter's voice shouting. We ran forward through the great forest. It was a fair distance out to the starlit road. We saw it as a wide shining esplanade. The people now were giants twice our height! Polter, himself towering with a seem-

ing fifty-foot stature, was standing by the gigantic canopy of the dock. He had dispersed the crowd. There was an open space on the esplanade—a run for us of about a hundred feet.

"We've got to chance it," I murmured. "Make a run for it—now."

We darted across. In the confusion, with all eyes centered on Polter, we escaped discovery. It was dim under the dock canopy. Polter had backed from the road and was walking to the barge. It lay like the length of an ocean liner, its sail looming an enormous spread above it. The gunwale was level with the dock. A dozen or more fifty-foot men were greeting Polter. They were amidships.

I realize now that in those moments as we scurried aboard like wharf rats, we took wild chances. We made for the stern which momentarily was unoccupied. To Polter and his men we were eight or nine inches tall. We dropped over the gunwale, slid down the thirty or forty-foot incline of the interior and landed on the bottom of the boat.

There were many places where we could safely hide. A litter of gigantic rope-strands was around us. We could see the bottom of a crossbench looming over head, and the great curving sides of the vessel with the gunwales outlined against the starlight.

The boat left the dock in a moment; the sail bellied out, enormous over us. Ten feet forward from us the towering figure of a man sat on a bench with the steering mechanism before him. Further on, the other men were dispersed, with one or two in the distant bow. Polter reclined on a cushioned couch amidships. Looking along the dark widely level bottom of the boat there were only the feet and legs of men visible.

Alan whispered, "Let's get closer."

We were insects soundlessly scuttling unnoticed in the dimness. It was noisy down here—the clank of the steering mechanism; the swish and surge of the water against the hull; the voices of the men.

We passed the boots of the seated helmsmen, and found another hiding place nearer Polter. We could see his giant length plainly. None of the other men were near him. He was reclining on an elbow, stretched at ease on a cushion. And at the moment, he was fumbling with the chains that fastened the little golden cage to his chest. The cage was double its former size to us now. A shaft of pale light came down, reflected from the great sail surface overhead. It struck the bars of the cage. We could see a small figure in there.

Then we heard Polter's voice. "I will let you out, Babs. You come out, sit on my hand and talk with me. That will be nice? We haf a little time."

He unfastened the cage and put it on the cushion beside him. He was still propped up on one elbow.

"I let you out, now. Be careful, Babs."

My heart was almost smothering me. "Alan! We've got to get still closer! Try something! Get large, shall we?"

Alan whispered tensely, "I don't know! I don't know what to do."

"We can get closer," Glora whispered. "But never larger—not here. They would discover us too soon."

We crept forward. We reached the edge of the cushion. Its top surface was a trifle lower than our heads—a billowing, wrinkled mass of fabric. But I saw that the folds of it were rough enough to afford a footing. I thought that I could climb it. We stood erect. There was a deep shadow along here, but it was brighter on the cushion top. We could see over its edge; an undulating spread of surface with the giant length of Polter stretched over it. The cage was near us. Polter's great fingers fumbled with it; a door in the lattice bars flipped open.

"Careful, my Babs!" His voice was a throaty, rumbling roar above us. "Careful! I do not want you to be hurt."

From the little doorway came the figure of Babs! The starlight glowed on her blue dress; her black hair was tumbling over her shoulders; her face was pale but she was unharmed.

I think that I had never loved her so much as at that moment. Nor ever seen her so beautiful as in miniature, standing at the door of her golden cage, bravely facing the monstrous misshapen figure of her captor.

We heard her small voice.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stand quiet. Now I put my hand for you."

His monstrous hand bristled with a thatch of heavy black hair. He slid it carefully along the cushion. Babs was barely the length of one of its finger joints. She climbed upon its palm.

"That iss right, Babs. Now I bring you—hold tight to my finger. Here, I crook the little one. Fling your arms around it."

With a swoop his hand took her aloft and away. Then we saw her, twenty feet or so in the air, still on his hand as he held it near his face.

"Now we haf a little talk, Babs. When we get to the island, I put you back in your cage."

I had a sudden flash of realization. There was something I could do. I know now my judgment was bad. I recall it struck me that Alan would want to do it also. And, perhaps, even Glora. But that wouldn't work. My chances, however desperate, were better alone. Glora and Alan—in our present size—could doubtless disembark safely. Glora knew the layout of the island. And she could follow Polter.

Alan and Glora were standing beside me peering over that billowing cushion spread toward the distant giant palm with Babs standing upon it. I gripped

Alan's shoulder.

"See here, Alan," I whispered vehemently: "What ever happens, we must follow Polter. Glora knows the way. Some opportunity will come to get large without being discovered. Then we'll rush Polter!"

Alan's white face turned to me. "Yes, that's what we're planning. But George, here on this boat—"

"Of course not. Can't do it here. Tell Glora, to be sure to follow Polter. Whatever happens, you'll think of nothing else: you won't will you?"

"George, what—"

"We've got to make some opportunity." I was trembling inside, fearful that Alan would be suspicious of me. Yet I had to make sure that he and Glora would stay as close to Polter as possible.

"All right," Alan agreed. "Listen to them."

Polter was talking to Babs. But I didn't hear the words I moved a trifle away. Rash decision! I hardly decided anything. There was only the vision of Babs before me and my love for her. My desperate need of doing something; getting to her, seeing her, being with her. I wanted her near my own size again as though the blessed normality of that would rationalize and lessen her danger. If only I had been less rash! If only back there in that tunnel I had stopped to see what it was my foot kicked against!

I slid away. Alan and Glora did not notice it; they were whispering together and gazing over the cushion at Babs. In the shadow of the cushion I moved some ten feet. On the undulating top of the cushion the little golden cage stood with its lattice door open. It was a few feet from my face.

I fumbled at my belt for the diminishing vial. I found one pellet left. Well, that would be enough. I was hurried. Alan might discover me. Polter might put Babs back in the cage and close its door. We might be near the island already, and the confusion, the activity of disembarking would defeat me. A thousand things might happen.

I touched the pellet to my tongue. In a few seconds the drug action had come and passed. The cushion top loomed well over my head. The side was a ridged, indescribably unnatural vista of cliff wall. The fabric was coarse with hairy strands, dented into little ravines and crevices. I climbed and I came panting to the pillow surface. The golden cage was six or eight feet away and was now two feet high.

Again I touched the drug to my tongue; held it an instant. The cage drew away; grew to a normal six-foot height; then larger, until in a moment it stopped. I stood peering at it, trying to gauge its size in relation to me. I wanted so intensely now to appear normal in Babs' eyes. The cage seemed about ten feet high. A little less, possibly. I barely tasted the pellet, and replaced it carefully in the vial. I

could only hope its efficacy would be preserved.

I had to chance that I wouldn't be seen while crossing this billowy expanse. I ran. The rope strands of the fabric now had spaces between their curving surfaces. The cage was a shining golden house, set on this wide rolling area. Far in the distance there was a blur—Polter's reclining body.

I reached the cage. It was a room about ten feet square and equally as high. Walled solid, top and bottom, and on three sides. The front was a lattice of bars, with a narrow six-foot doorway, standing open now.

I dashed in. The interior was not wholly bare. There was a metal-wrought couch fastened to the wall, with a railing around it and handles. It suggested a ship's bunk. There was a railing at convenient height all around the wall.

I sought a hiding place. I saw just one—under the couch. It was secluded enough. There was a grillelike lattice extending down from the seat to the floor. I squeezed under one end, and lay wedged behind the grille.

How much time passed I don't know. My thoughts were racing. Babs would be coming.

I heard the distant approaching rumble of Polter's voice. Through the grille I could see across the floor of the ten foot cage to the front lattice bars. Outside, there appeared a huge, pink-white, mottled blob—Polter's hand, a ridged and pitted surface with great, bristling black stalks of hair.

The figure of Babs came through the cage doorway. Blessed normality! The same slim little Babs who always stood, since we were both matured, with her head about level with my shoulders.

The latticed door swung shut with a reverberating metallic clank. Babs stood tense, clinging to the wall railing. I heard the blurred rumble of Polter's voice.

"Hold tightly, my little Babs!"

The room lurched; went upward and sidewise with a wild dizzying swoop. Babs clung to the rail and I was wedged prone under the couch. Then the movement stopped; there was a jolting, rocking, and outside I heard the clank of metal. Polter was fastening the chains of the cage to his chest.

A white glow now came through the bars. It was starlight reflecting from Polter's shirt bosom. An abyss of distance was outside. I could see nothing but the white glow.

Momentarily there was very little movement in the room. Only the rhythmic sway of Polter's breathing and an occasional jolt as he shifted his position. The floor was tilted at a sharp angle. Babs came toward the couch, pulling herself along the wall railing.

I called softly, "Babs!"

She stopped. I called again, "Babs! Don't cry out! It's George! Here—stand

still!''

She gave a little cry. ''George—where are you? I don't—''

I slid out from my concealment and stood up, holding to the railing.

Blessed normality of size! She cried again, ''George! You! How did you get here?''

She edged along the railing, a step or two down the tilting floor, then released her hold and flung herself into my waiting arms.

''I think we are landing. Hold on to the railing, George. When the room moves it goes with a rush.''

Babs laughed softly. It must have seemed to her, after being alone in here, that now our plight was far less desperate. She had told me how she was captured. A man accosted her on the Terrace, saying he wanted to speak to her about Alan. Then a weapon threatened her. Amid all those people she was held up in old-fashioned style, hurried to a taxicar and whirled away.

She was saying now, ''When Polter moves, it is dizzying. You'll see.''

''I have already, Babs. Heavens, what a swoop!''

The room was more level now. We carefully drew ourselves to the front lattice. Polter was standing, and we had the white sheen from his shirt front. A sheer drop was outside the bars, but looking down I could see the outlines of his body with the huge spread of the boat's cockpit underneath us.

A confusion of rumbling voices sounded. Blurred giant shapes were outside. The room jolted and swayed as the boat landed and Polter disembarked.

Babs stood clinging to me. We, at least, were normal in this metal barred room, Babs and I. But outside was the abnormality of largeness. I think that in relation to us, the men were of over two hundred-foot stature, and the hunched Polter a trifle less. It seemed as he walked that we were lurching at least a hundred and fifty feet above ground.

''You had better hide,'' Babs urged. ''He might stop and speak to someone. If anyone looked in here you would be seen; no chance then, even to get across the room.''

It was true. But for a few moments I lingered. I could distinguish vegetation on their flat roof-tops, as though flower gardens were laid there.

We passed a house with its hundred-foot oval windows all aglow with light. Music floated out—a distant blare of sounds, and the ribald laughter of giant voices. I had seen no women among these giants of the island. But now a huge face was at one of the ovals. A dissolute, painted woman of Earth, staring out at Polter as he passed. It was like the enormous close-up image on a large motion picture screen. She shouted ribald jest as he went by.

''George, please go back. Suppose she had seen you?''

We were ascending a hill. A distance ahead a great oblong building loomed like a giant's palace, which indeed it was. We headed for it, passed through a vast arching doorway into the greater dimness of an echoing interior. I scurried back across the lurching room and again wedged myself under the couch. Babs stood at the lattice ten feet away. We dared to talk in low tones; the rumbling voices and footsteps outside would make our tiny voices inaudible to Polter.

I was tense with my plans. I had told them to Babs. With the one remaining partially used pellet of the diminishing drug we could make ourselves small enough to walk out through the bars. Then my black vial of the enlarging drug, as yet unused, would take us up, out to our own world. We could not use the drugs now. But the chance might come when Polter would set the cage on the ground, or somewhere so that we might climb down from it, with a chance to hide and get large before we were discovered. I would fight our way upward; all I needed was a fair start in size.

But I lay now with doubts assailing me. This was the first moment I had had for calm thoughts, though in truth they were far from calm! Were Alan and Glora following us now? I could only hope so. Once out of this, Babs and I would have to rejoin them. But how? Panic swept me. I shouldn't have left them. Or at least I should have told them what I was trying to do, and given Alan a chance to plan.

The panic grew, the premonition of disaster. From my belt I took the opalescent vial with its one partially used pellet. I dumped the pellet out. It was spoiling! The exposure to the air and the moisture of my tongue, had ruined it! I realized the catastrophe, as I held its crumbling, deliquescing fragments on my palm it melted into vapor and was gone!

We couldn't make ourselves smaller! Now we'd have to wait until Polter opened the cage. But once outside, the enlarging drug would give us our chance to fight our way upward. My trembling fingers sought the black vial in my belt. It wasn't there! My mind flung back: in that tunnel, something had dropped and I had kicked it! Accursed chance! My accursed, heedless stupidity!

I had lost the black vial! We were helpless! Caged! Marooned here in a size microscopic!

CHAPTER VIII

I lay concealed and Babs stood at the lattice of our cage room. I was aware that Polter had entered some vast apartment of this giant palace. The light outside was brighter; I heard voices—Polter's and another man's. I could see the distant monster shape of one. He was at first so far away that all his outline was visible. A seated man in a huge white room. I thought there were great shelves with enormous bottles. The spread of table tops passed under our cage as Polter walked by them. They held a litter of apparatus, and there was the smell of chemicals in the

air. This seemed to be a laboratory.

The man stood up to greet Polter. I had a glimpse of his head and shoulders. He wore a white linen coat, open, soft collar and black tie. He seemed an old man, queerly old, with snow-white hair.

I had an instant of whirling impressions. Something was familiar about his face. It was wrinkled and seamed with lines of age and care. There were gentle blue eyes.

Then all I could see was the vast spread of his white shirt and coat, a black splotch of his tie outside our bars as Polter faced him.

Babs gave a low cry. "Why—why—dear God—"

And then I knew! And Polter's words were not needed, though I heard their rumble.

"I am back again, Kent. Are you still rebellious? You haf still determined to compound no more of our drugs? You would rather I killed you? Then see what I haf here. This little cage, someone—"

It was Dr. Kent whom he addressed. He must have been here all these years!

Babs turned her white face toward me. "George, it's father! He's alive!"

"Quiet, Babs! Don't let him know I'm here. Remember!"

The old man recognized her. "Babs!" It was an agonized cry. The blur of him was gone as he sank down into his chair.

Polter continued standing, I could envisage his sardonic grin.

From over us came Polter's rumble. "She iss glad to see you, Kent. I haf her here, safe. You always knew I would nefer be satisfied until I had my little Babs? Well, now I haf her. Can you hear me?"

A sudden desperate calmness fell on Babs. She called evenly. "Yes, I hear you. Father, don't anger him. Do what he says. Dr. Polter, will you let me be with my father? After all these years, let me be with him, just for a little while. In his size—normal."

"Hah! My Babs iss scheming."

"No, I want to talk to him, after all these years when I thought he was dead."

"Scheming? You think, my little Babs, that he has the drugs? I am not so much a fool. He makes them. He can do that. And that last secret reaction, only he can perform. He iss stubborn. Never would he tell me that one reaction. But he makes no drugs complete, only when I am here."

"No, Dr. Polter! I want only to be with him."

The old man's broken voice floated up to us. "You won't harm her, Polter?"

"No. Fear nothing. But you no longer rebel?"

"I'll do what you tell me." The tones carried hopeless resignation, years of

being beaten down, rebelling—but now this last blow vanquished him. Then he spoke again, with a sudden strange fire.

"Even for the life of my daughter, I will not make your drugs, Polter, if you mean to harm our Earth."

The golden cage room swooped as Polter sat down. "Hah! Now we bargain. What do you care what I do to your world? You never will see it again. I can lie to you. My plans—"

"I *do* care."

"Well, I will tell you, Kent. I am good-natured now. Why should I not be with my dear little Babs? I tell you, I am done with the Earth world. It iss much nicer here. My friends, they haf a good time always. We like this little atom realm. I am going out once more. I must hide the little piece of golden quartz so no harm will come to it."

Polter was evidently in a high good humor. His voice fell to an intimate tone of comradeship; but still I could not mistake the irony in it.

"You listen to me, Kent. There was a time, years ago, when we were good friends. You liked your young assistant, the hunchback Polter. Iss it not so? Then why should we quarrel now? I am gifing up the Earth world. I wanted of it only the little Babs.... You look at me so strange! You do not speak."

"There is nothing to say," retorted Dr. Kent wearily.

"Then you listen. I haf much gold above in Quebec. You know that. So very simple to take it out of our atom, grow large with it to what we call up there the size of a hundred feet. I haf a place, a room, secluded from prying eyes under a dome roof. I become very tall, holding a piece of gold. It is large when I am a hundred feet tall. So I haf collected much gold. They think I own a mine. I haf a smelter and my gold quartz I make into ingots, refined to the standard purity. So simple, and I am a rich man.

"But gold does not bring happiness, my friend Kent." He chuckled ironically at his use of the platitude. "There iss more in life than the ownership of gold. You ask my plans. I haf Babs, now. I am gifing up the Earth world. The mysterious man they know as Frank Rascor will vanish. I will hide our little fragment of quartz. No one up there will even try to find it. Then I come down here, with Babs, and we will haf so nice a little government and rule this world. No more of the drugs then will be needed, Kent. When you die, let the secret die with you."

Again Polter's voice became ingratiating, even more so than before. "We will be friends, Kent. Our little Babs will lof me; why should she not? You will tell her—advise her—and we will all three be very happy."

Dr. Kent said abruptly, "Then leave her with me now. That was her request, a moment ago. If you expect to treat her kindly, then why not—"

"I do! I do! But not now. I cannot spare her now. I am very busy, but I must take her with me."

Babs had been silent, clinging to the bars of our cage. She called; "Why? I ask you to put this cage down."

"Not now, little bird."

"Let me be with my father."

It struck a pang through me. Babs was scheming but not the way Polter thought. She wanted the cage put on the floor, herself out, and a chance for me to escape. I had not yet told her of my miserable stupidity in losing the vial.

Polter was repeating, "No, little bird. Presently; not now. I will take you with me on my last trip out. I want to talk with you in normal size when I haf time."

Our room swooped as he stood up. "You think over what I haf said, Kent. You get ready now to make the fresh drugs I will need to bring down all my men from the outer world. They will all be glad to come, or, if not—well, we can easily kill those who refuse. You make the drugs. I need plenty. Will you?"

"Yes."

"That iss good. I come back soon and gif you the catalyst for that last reaction. Will you be ready?"

"Yes."

The blur outside our bars swung with a dizzying whirl as Polter turned and left the room, locking its door after him with a reverberating clank.

* * * * *

Left alone in his laboratory, Dr. Kent began his preparations for making a fresh supply of the drugs. This room, with two smaller ones adjoining, was at once his workshop and his prison. He stood at his shelves, selecting the basic chemicals. He could not complete the final compounds. The catalyst which was necessary for the final reaction would be brought to him by Polter.

How long he worked there with his thoughts in a whirl at seeing Babs, he did not know. His movements were automatic; he had done all this so many times before. His mind was confused, and he was trembling from head to foot—an old, queerly, unnaturally old man now—unnerved. His fingers could hardly hold the test tubes.

His thoughts were flying. Babs was here, come down from the world above. It was disaster—the thing he had feared all these years.

He suddenly heard a voice.

"Father!"

And again: "Father!" A tiny voice, down by his shoe tops. Two small figures were there on the floor beside him. They were both panting, winded by running. They were enlarging.

It was Alan and Glora, who had followed Polter from the boat, then diminished again and had come running through the tiny crack under the metal door of the laboratory.

They grew to a foot in size, down by Dr. Kent's legs. He was too unnerved to stand; he sat in a chair while Alan swiftly told him what had happened. Babs was in the golden cage. Dr. Kent knew that; but none of them knew what had happened to me.

"We must make you small, Father. We have the drugs, here with us."

"Yes! How much have you? Show me. Oh, my boy, that you are here—and Babs—"

"Don't you worry. We'll get away from him."

Glora and Alan had almost reached Dr. Kent's size before their excited fingers could get out the vials. They took some of the diminishing drug to check their growth. Alan handed his father a black vial.

"Yes, lad—"

"No! Wait, that's the wrong drug. This other—"

Dr. Kent had opened the vial. His trembling hand spilled some of the pellets, but none of them noticed it.

"Father, this one." Alan held an opalescent vial. "Take this one."

Glora said abruptly, "Listen! Is that someone coming?"

They thought they heard approaching footsteps. A moment passed but no one came into the room.

"Hurry," urged Glora. "That was nothing. We're waiting too long."

"My boy—Alan, after all these years—"

As they were about to take the diminishing drug a very queer sound came from across the room. A scuttling, scratching, and the drone of wings.

"God, Father—look!"

Over by the wall, a giant fly was running across the floor. The fly had eaten some of the sweetish powder.

The enlarging drug was loose!

A few drops of water lay mingled with the drug on the floor. And from the water nameless hideous things were rising!

CHAPTER IX

To Alan the first moments that followed the escape of the drug were the most horrible of his life. The discovery struck old Dr. Kent, Glora and Alan into a numb, blank confusion. They stood transfixed, staring with cold terror at the fly which was scurrying along the floor close to the wall. It was already as large as

Alan's hand. It ran into the corner, hit the wall in its confused alarm, and turned back. Its wings were droning with an audible hum. It reared itself on its hairy legs, lifted and sailed across the room.

As though drawn by a magnet, Alan turned to watch it. It landed on the wall. Alan was aware of Dr. Kent rushing with trembling steps to a shelf where bottles stood. Glora was stricken into immobility, the blood draining from her face.

The fly flew again. It passed directly over Alan. Its body, with a membrane sac of eggs, was now as large as his head; its widespread transparent wings were beating with a reverberating drone.

Alan flung a bottle which was on the table beside him. It missed the fly, crashed against the ceiling, came down with splintering glass and spilling liquid. Fumes spread chokingly over the room.

The fly landed again on the floor. Larger now! Expanding with a horribly rapid growth. Glora flung something—a little wooden rack with a few empty test tubes in it. The rack struck the monstrous fly, but did not hurt it. The fly stood with hairy legs braced under its bulging body. Its multiple eyes were staring at the humans. And with its size must have come a sense of power, for it seemed to Alan that the monstrous insect was abnormally alert as it stood measuring its adversaries, gathering itself to attack them.

Only a few seconds had passed. Confused thoughts swept Alan. This fly with its growth would soon fill this room. Burst it; burst upward through a wrecked palace; soar out, and by the power of its size alone devastate this world.

He heard himself shouting, "Father, get back! It's too large! I've _got_ to kill it!"

Could he wrestle with it and hope to win? Alan edged around the center table. He was bathed in cold sweat. This thing was horrifying! The fly was already half the length of his own body. In a moment it might be twice that! He was aware of Glora pulling at him, and his father rushing past him with a bottle of liquid, shouting:

"Alan! Run! You and the girl, get out of here! Into the other room—"

Then Alan saw the things on the floor! His foot crushed one with a slippery squash! Nameless, hideous, noisome things grown monstrous, risen from their lurking invisibility in the drops of water! Sodden, gray-black and green-slimed monsters of the deep; palpitating masses of pulp! One lay rocking, already as large as a football with streamers of ooze hanging from it, and squirting a black inky fluid. Others were rods of red jelly-pulp, already as large as lead pencils, quivering, twitching. Disease germs, these ghastly things, enlarging from the invisibility of a drop of water!

The fly landed with a thud on the center table. The fumes of the shattered bottle of chemicals were choking Alan. He flung himself toward the monster fly,

but Glora held him.

"No! Escape to the other room!"

Dr. Kent was stamping the things upon the floor; pouring acids upon them. Some eluded him. The air in the room was unbreathable....

Alan and Glora reached the bedroom. The laboratory was a hideous chaos. They were aware of its outer door opening, disclosing the figure of Polter who, undoubtedly, had been attracted by the noise. He shouted a startled oath. Alan heard it above the beating wings of the monstrous fly. Things lurched at the opened door; Polter banged it upon them and rushed away, shouting the alarm through the palace.

Dr. Kent was stammering, "Not the enlarging drug, Glora, child, the other! Hurry!"

Alan helped Glora with the opalescent vial. Things were lurching toward this room, from the laboratory. Alan, with averted face, choked by the incoming fumes, slammed the door upon the gruesome turmoil.

They took the diminishing drug. The bedroom expanded. The hideous sounds from the laboratory, and the whole palace now ringing with a wild alarm, soon faded into blessed remoteness of distance....

"I think this is the way, Alan. Off there—a doorway from my bedroom. Polter always kept it locked, but it leads into a corridor. We must get out of here. A crack under the door—is that it, off there?" Dr. Kent pointed into the gloomy blur of distance. "We're horribly small—it's so far to run—and I've lost my sense of direction."

The drug had ceased its action. The wooden floor of the room had expanded to a spread of cellular surface, ridged with broken, tubelike tunnels; pits and jagged cave-mouths. A knothole yawned like a crater a hundred feet away.

"We are too small," Glora protested hurriedly. "The door is where you say, Dr. Kent, but miles away."

With the other drug, the room contracted. The floor surface shrank and smoothed a little. The door was distinguishable—a square panel several hundred feet in width and towering into the upper haze. The black line of the crack was visible along its bottom.

They ran to it. The top of the crack was ten feet above their heads. They ran under, across the wide intervening darkness toward a glow of light. Then they came from under the door into a corridor—and shrank against a cliff wall as with a rush of wind and pounding tread the blurred shapes of a man's huge feet and legs rushed past. The upper air was filled with rumbling shouts.

"We must chance it!" exclaimed Dr. Kent. "It's too far in this size. We must get larger—and if they see us, we'll fight our way out!"

In the turmoil of the doomed palace no one noticed them. They cast aside all restraint. It was too dangerous to wait. The excessive dose they took of the drug made the corridor shrink with dizzying speed. They rushed along its length. Alan hurled a little man aside who was in their path. They were already larger than Polter's people.

They squeezed out of a shrinking doorway. The dwindling island was a turmoil. Little figures were pouring from the palace. At the edge of the water. Alan, Glora and Dr. Kent stood for an instant looking behind them. The palace was rocking. Its roof heaved upward and then smashed and fell aside with the clatter of tumbling masonry. The monstrous fly, its hideous face mashed and oozing, reared itself up and, with broken torn wings, tried to soar away. But it could not. It slipped back. The drone and buzz of its fright sounded over the chaos of noise. Other things came lurching and twisting upward, slithering out....

The expanding body of the fly was pushing the palace walls outward. In a moment it collapsed and the fly emerged.

To Alan and his companions the scene was all shrinking into a miniature chaos of horror at their shoe tops. A diminuendo of screams mingled down there. Overhead were the stars, shining peacefully remote. Nearby lay a rapidly narrowing channel of shining water. A tiny city was across it. Lights were moving. The panic had spread from the island to Orena. Beyond the tiny city, was a range of mountains, a cliff, gleaming in the starlight, and tunnel-mouths.

Suddenly against the stars off there, Alan saw the enlarging figure of Polter, his hunched shape unmistakable. He was facing the other way. He lunged and scrambled into a yawning black hole in the mountains. Polter was escaping! None of these people except himself had the drugs. He was escaping with the golden cage, out of this doomed atomic world to the Earth above.

Glora murmured, "There is our way out. Your way. And that is Polter going. I do not think he saw us. So much is growing gigantic here."

Dr. Kent muttered, "We will wait a moment—wade across—or leap over, and follow him out. Babs is with him—dear God I hope so! This is a doomed realm!"

Alan held Glora close. And suddenly he was laughing—a madness, half hysterical. "Why, this, all this—why look, Glora, it's funny! This little world all excited, an ant-hill, outraged! Look! There's our giant sailboat!"

Down near their feet the inch-long sailboat stood at its dock. Tiny human figures were rushing for it; others, floundering in the water, were trying to climb upon it. Dr. Kent had stepped a foot or two from the shore, and tiny, lashing white rollers rocked the boat, almost engulfing it.

Alan's laugh rang out. "God! It's funny, isn't it? All those little creatures so excited!"

"Steady, lad!" Dr. Kent touched him. "Don't let yourself laugh! A moment

now, then we'll wade across. Polter won't have much start on us. We mustn't get too close to him in size, but try and attack him unawares. We've got to get Babs away from him."

The narrowing passage rose hardly to their knees. They stepped ashore, well to one side of the toy city. Their growth had almost stopped. But suddenly Alan realized that Glora was diminishing! She had taken the other drug.

"Glora! What are you doing?"

"I must go back, Alan. This is my world, doomed perhaps, but I cannot forsake it now. I must give the enlarging drug to my father. And others who can rise and fight these monsters."

"Glora!"

Dr. Kent said hurriedly, "She's right, Alan. There is a chance they can save their city. For her to leave them would be dastardly."

She cried, "You go on up, Alan. You have enough of the drugs. I am going back!"

"No," he protested. "You can't! If you do, I'm coming with you!"

She clung to him. He felt her body diminishing within his encircling arms. His love for her swept him—this girl who had cajoled Polter, or tricked him and stolen several of the vials from him, heavens knows how, and followed him up to the other world. This girl whom Alan had come to love, was leaving him, perhaps forever.

As he stood there, with the miniature landscape at his feet in the wan starlight—the panic-stricken tiny city, the island with its monsters rising to overwhelm this tiny world—it seemed to Alan that if he let her go it was the end for him of all life's promised happiness.

"Alan, lad, come." His father was pulling him along. So horrible a choice! Alan thought that I was back on that island. But Babs, a prisoner in the golden cage, was with Polter, plunging upward in size. And his father was beside him, pleading.

"Alan—come—I can't get out alone, or save Babs. And Polter, with the power of this drug, can conquer and enslave our Earth as he has enslaved Orena—just one little city of one tiny golden atom! Believe me, lad, your duty lies above."

Glora's head was now down at Alan's waist. He stooped and kissed her white forehead; his fingers, just for an instant, smoothed her glossy hair.

"Good-bye, Glora."

She plunged away, and her tread as she dwindled mashed the forest behind the city. Alan and his father ran for the cliff. They were too large to squeeze into the little hole. But in a moment they made themselves smaller. They climbed as they dwindled; checked the drug action and rushed into the tunnel-mouth.

Alan stopped just for an instant to gaze out over the starlit scene. It was almost the same viewpoint from which he had his first sight of Glora's world only an hour or two before. The distant island beyond the city showed plainly with the shining water around it. The vegetation there was growing! And there were dark, horribly formless blobs lurching outward and rising with monstrous bulk against the background of the stars!

"Alan! Come, lad!"

With a prayer for Glora trembling on his lips, Alan plunged into the dim phosphorescent gloom of the tunnel.

CHAPTER X

To Babs and me the ride in the golden cage strapped to Polter's chest as he made his escape outward into largeness was an experience awesome and frightening almost beyond description. We heard the alarm in the palace on the island. Polter rushed to Dr. Kent's laboratory door, looked in, and in a moment banged it shut. Babs and I saw very little. We knew only that something terrible had happened; we could see only a blur with formless things in the void beneath our bars; and there were the choking fumes of chemicals surging at us.

Polter rushed through the castle corridor. We heard rumbling distant shouts.

"The drug is loose! The drug is loose! Monsters! Death for everyone!"

The room swayed with horrible dizzying lurches as Polter ran. We clung to the lattice bars, our legs and arms entwined. There were moments when Polter leaped, or suddenly stooped, and our reeling senses all but faded.

"Babs! Don't let go! Don't lose consciousness!"

If she should be limp, here in this lurching room, her body to be flung back and forth across its confines—that would be death in a moment. I didn't think I could hold her, but I managed to get an arm about her waist.

"Babs, are you all right?"

"I'm—all right, George. I can stand it. We're—he is enlarging."

"Yes."

I saw water far beneath us, lashed into a turmoil of foam with Polter's wading steps. There was a brief swaying vista of a toy city; starlight overhead; a lurching swaying miniature of landscape as Polter ran for the towering cliffs. Then he climbed and scrambled into the tunnel-mouth. Had he turned at that instant doubtless he would have seen the rising distant figures of Glora, Alan and Dr. Kent. But evidently he didn't see them. Nor did we.

Polter spoke only very occasionally to Babs. "Hold tightly!" It was a rumbling voice from above us. He made no move to touch the cage, except that a few times the great blur of his hand came up to adjust its angle.

The lurching and jolting was less violent in the tunnel. Polter's frenzy to escape was subsiding into calmness. He traversed the tunnel with a methodical stride. We were aware of him climbing over the noisome litter of the dead giant's body which blocked the tunnel's further end. We heard his astonished exclamations. But evidently he did not suspect what had happened, thinking only that the stupid messenger had miscalculated his growth and had been crushed.

We emerged into a less dim area. Polter did not stop at the fallen giant. Nothing mattered now to him, quite evidently, save his own exit with Babs from this atomic realm. His movements seemed calm, yet hurried.

We realized now how different an outward journey was from the trip coming in. This was all only an inch of golden quartz! The stages upward were frequently only a matter of growth in size; the distances in this vast desert realm of golden rock always were shrinking. Polter many times stood almost motionless until the closing, dwindling walls made him scramble upward into the greater space above.

It may have been an hour, or less. Babs and I, from our smaller viewpoint, with the landscape so frequently blurred by distance and Polter's movements, seldom recognized where we were. But I realized going out was far easier in every way than coming in. Easier to determine the route, since usually the diminishing caverns and gullies made the upward step obvious.... We knew when Polter scrambled up the incline ramp.

It seemed impossible for us to plan anything. Would Polter make the entire trip without a stop? It seemed so. We had no drugs, and our cage was barred beyond possibility of our getting out. But even if we had had the drugs, or had our door been open, there was no escape. An abyss of distance was always yawning beyond our lattice—the sheer precipice of Polter's body from his chest to the ground.

"Babs, we must make him stop. It he sits down to rest you might get him to take you out. I must reach his drugs."

"Yes. I'll try it, George."

Polter was momentarily standing motionless as though gazing around him, judging what to do next. His size seemed stationary. Beyond our bars we could see the distant circular walls as though this were some giant crater-pit in which Polter was standing. Then I thought I recognized it—the round, nearly vertical pit into which Alan had plunged his hand and arm. Above us then was a gully, blind at one end. And above that, the outer surface, the summit of the fragment of golden quartz.

"Babs, I know where we are! If he takes you out, keep his attention. I'll try and get one of his black vials. Make him hold you near the ground. If I see you there, in position where you can jump, I'll startle him. Babs it's desperately dan-

gerous but I can't think of anything else. Jump. Get away from him. I'll keep his attention on me. Then I'll join you if I can—with the drug."

Polter was moving. We had no time to say more.

"I'll try it, George." For just an instant she clung to me with her soft arms about my neck. Our love was sweeping us in this desperate moment, and it seemed that above us was a remote Earth world holding the promise of all our dreams. Or were we cross-starred, doomed like the realm of the atom? Was this swift embrace now marking the end of everything for us?

Babs called, "Dr. Polter?"

We could feel his movements stopping.

"Yes? You are all right, Babs?"

She laughed—a ripple of silvery laughter—but there was tragic fear in her eyes as she gazed at me. "Yes, Dr. Polter, but breathless. Almost dead, but not quite. What happened? I want to come out and talk to you."

"Not now, little bird."

"But I want to." To me it was a miracle that she could call so lightly and hold that note of lugubrious laughter in her voice. "I'm hungry. Didn't you think of that? And frightened. Take me out."

He was sitting down! "You remind me that I am tired, Babs. And hungry, also. I haf a little food. You shall come out for just a short time."

"Thank you. Take me carefully."

Our tilted cage was near the ground as he seated himself. But it was still too far for me to jump.

I murmured, "Babs it's not close enough to the ground."

"Wait, George, I'll fix that. You hide! If he looks in he'll see you."

I scrambled back to my hiding place. Polter's huge fingers were fumbling at our bars. The little door sprang open.

"Come, Babs."

He held the cupped bowl of his hand to the doorway. "Come out."

"No!" she called. "It is too far down!"

"Come. That iss foolish."

"No! I'm afraid. Put the cage on the ground."

"Babs!" His finger and thumb came reaching in to seize her, but she avoided them.

"Dr. Polter! Don't! You'll crush me!"

"Then come out on my hand."

He seemed annoyed. I had scrambled back to the doorway; I knew he couldn't see me so long as the cage remained strapped to his shirt front.

I whispered, "I can make it, Babs!"

Polter was apparently on one elbow now, half turned to one side. From our cage, the sloping gleaming white surface of his stiff glossy shirt bosom went down a steep incline. His belt was down there, and the outward bulging curve of his lap—a spreading surface where I could land like a scuttling insect, unobserved, if only Babs could hold his attention.

I whispered vehemently, "Try it! Go out! Leave me—keep talking to him!"

She called instantly, "All right, then. Bring your hand! Closer! Carefully! It seems so high up here!"

She swung herself into his palm, and flung her arms about the great pillar of his crooked finger. The bowl of his hand moved slowly away. I heard her faint voice, and his overhead rumble.

I chanced it! I didn't know his exact position or which way he was looking.

Again I heard Bab's voice. "Careful, Dr. Polter. Don't let me fall!"

"Yes, little bird."

I let myself down from the tilted doorway, hung by my hand and dropped. I struck the ramp-like yielding surface of his shirt bosom. I slid, tumbling, scrambling, and landed softly in the huge folds of his trouser fabric. I was unhurt. The width of his belt, high as my body, was near me. I shrank against it. I found I could cling to its upper edge.

My hold came just in time. He shifted and sat up. I was lifted with a swoop of movement. When it steadied I saw above me the top of his knee. His left leg was crooked, the foot drawn close to him. Babs was perched up there on the knee summit. His right leg was outstretched. I was at the right side of his belt. I could dart off along that curving expanse of his leg and leap to the ground. If he would hold this position! One of the pouches of his belt was near me. The vial in it was black. The enlarging drug! I moved toward it.

But Babs was too high to jump from that summit of his crooked knee! I think she saw me at his belt. I heard her voice.

"I cannot eat up here. It is too high. Oh, please be careful how you move! I am so dizzy, so frightened! You move with such great jerks!"

He had what seemed a huge surface of bread and meat. He was breaking off crumbs to put before her. I reached the pouch of his belt. The vial was as long as my body. I tugged to try and lift it out.

All the giant contours of Polter's body shifted as he cautiously moved. I clung. I saw that Babs was being held gently between his thumb and forefinger. He lowered her to the ground, and she stood beside the bread and the meat he had placed there.

And she had the courage to laugh! "Why this—this is an enormous sand-

wich! You will have to break it."

He was leaning over her, half turned on his side. The vial came free. I shoved it; but I could not control its weight. I pushed desperately. It slid over the round brink of his right hip, and fell behind him. I heard the tinkling thud of it down on the rocks.

There was no alarm. I could not chance leaping from his hip. I scurried along the convex top of his outstretched leg, and beyond his knee I jumped.

I landed safely. I could see the black vial back across the broken rock surface, with the bulge of Polter's hip above it. I ran back and reached the vial, tugged at its huge stopper. The cork began to yield under my panting, desperate efforts. In a moment I would have a pellet of the enlarging drug; make away with it and startle Polter so that Babs might dart off and escape.

The huge stopper of the vial was larger than my head. It came suddenly out. I flung it away, plunged in my hand, and seized an enormous round pellet.

Then abruptly the alarm came, and I had not caused it! Polter ripped out a startled, rumbling curse and sat upright. Under the curve of his leg I saw Babs had been momentarily neglected. She was running.

Across the boulder-strewn plain, two tiny men had appeared. Polter had seen them.

They were the enlarging figures of Dr. Kent and Alan!

CHAPTER XI

The astounded Polter was taken wholly by surprise. He had no idea that anyone was following him. He thought he was alone with tiny Babs in this rock-strewn metal desert. What he saw as he scrambled to his feet were four insect-size humans, two of them at a distance, and two within reach of him, and all of them scampering in different directions. The ground was littered with crags and boulders; it was ridged and pitted, pock-marked, with tiny crater-holes and caves. The four scuttling figures almost instantly had disappeared from his sight.

I did not see where Babs went. I turned from the black vial of Polter's enlarging drug, and with the huge pellet under my arm I ran leaping over the rough ground and flung myself into a gully. I lay prone, flattened against a rock. In the murky distance of a pseudo-sky overhead, the monstrous head and shoulders of Polter were visible. I could see down to just below his waist. The empty cage with its door flapping open hung against his shirt-front. He had stooped to try and recover Babs. And instinctively his hands went to his belt to seize his enlarging drug.

They were fumbling there now. He hauled out an opalescent vial of the diminishing element. But his black vial was gone. His annoyance turned into fear as he searched for it in the other compartments of his belt. I had thought that he had

more than one black vial, but now it seemed not. His huge face was swept with the panic of terror. He glanced wildly around him.

Through the open end of my gully I saw in the distance, miles away, the enlarging figure of Alan rising up. Then it ducked in back of a distant rising peak. Polter undoubtedly saw it. He was fumbling with his opalescent vial. In his confused panic he made the mistake of taking the diminishing drug and instantly seemed to regret it. His curse rumbled above me. His glance went down to the rocks at his feet, and there he saw his black vial lying with its stopper out. His body already was beginning to dwindle. He stooped, seized the vial, and took the enlarging drug. The shock of it mode him stagger; momentarily he disappeared from my line of vision but I could hear his panting breath and the unsteady pound of his footsteps.

I still held that huge round ball of the drug. I seized a loose stone and frantically knocked off a chunk-heaven knows how much. I shoved it into my mouth, chewed and hastily swallowed it. And with the lurching, swaying, shrinking gully closing in upon me, I ran to get out of its distant end.

I was heading toward where Alan and his father were hiding. I came from the gully into the open, just as the walls closed behind me. The whole scene was a dizzying, blurred sway of contracting movement. I saw that I was in a circular valley now some five miles in diameter, with its jagged enclosing walls rising sheerly perpendicular out of sight in the haze overhead.

Polter had staggered backward. I saw him a mile or so away. His back at that instant was turned to me. He was now no more than three or four times my own height. He scrambled against the valley cliff wall as though trying to find a foothold to climb up it. He went a little way, but fell back.

Near me, Alan and old Dr. Kent suddenly appeared. I was larger than they. Alan gasped with surprise.

"You, George! You got Babs—"

"Yes—Babs is around somewhere! Stay down here! Don't lose her in size! Stay small! Search and—"

"But, George—"

"I'll tackle Polter. I've taken—God, I don't know how much I've taken of the drug!"

They were shrinking down by my boot tops. Alan shouted suddenly, "There's Babs! Thank God, she's all right."

She was so small that I couldn't see her, or even hear her, though she must have been calling to them. Alan again screamed up at me with his little voice:

"She's here, George! You—go on and get Polter! I can't overtake you—haven't enough of the drug!" His tiny voice was fading away. "Go and get him,

George! This time—get him—"

I swung with a staggering step around to face the open valley. It had by now shrunk to nearly half a mile in width. Its smooth walls rose some two or three thousand feet to an upper circular horizon with murky distance overhead. Polter stood across from me. He had tried to climb out but could not. He saw me and came lurching. We were a quarter of a mile from each other. I ran forward through a shifting scene of shrinking rock walls and crawling, contracting ground. Quarter of a mile? It seemed hardly more than a score of running strides before Polter loomed close ahead of me. He was still nearly twice my size. I stooped, seized a loose boulder, and flung it. I missed his face, but, as his hand went up carrying a bare knife, by fortunate chance, the stone struck his wrist. The knife dropped to the rocks. He stooped to recover it, but I was upon him. As I felt his huge arms go about me, half lifting me, my foot struck the knife. But in an instant it was swept down into smallness beneath us as we expanded above it.

Both of us now were unarmed in this combat of size. I was an immature youth in Polter's first grip upon me. I heard his panting words, grimly triumphant:

"This—George Randolph, I haf been—waiting for so many years! The hunchback—takes his revenge—now—"

He lifted me. His great arms were unbelievably powerful, but I could feel them dwindling. I was enlarging faster. Just a few moments—if I could last a few moments.... My feet were off the ground, my chest pressed close against the little cage between us. He had a hand shoving back my head; his fingers sought my throat. I wound my legs around him, and then he tried to throw me down and fall upon me. But he had twisted and my back was against the cliff. The rocks were shoving at us, insistently pushing with almost a living movement. Polter staggered with me. His grip on my throat tightened, shutting off my breath. My senses whirled. His grim sardonic face over me became blurred. I tore futilely at my throat to break his choking grip. All the world was a roaring chaos to my fading senses. Then in the blur I saw horror sweep his expression. His fingers involuntarily loosened. I got a breath of blessed air, gasping, and my sight cleared.

Walls were closing around us! We were in a pit barely ten feet wide, with the top a few feet above Polter's head. The nearer wall shoved us again. Our bodies almost filled the shrinking pit! Polter lurched and cast me off. I half fell, striking my shoulder against the opposite wall, and I saw Polter leap at the dwindling brink and scramble out.

I was nearly wedged. As I rose, the top of the pit only reached my waist. Polter had fallen on the upper ground, and was on hands and knees. Instead of standing up, he lurched at me trying to shove me back. But I was out; I clutched at him. We were almost of a size now. We rolled on the ground, locked together; rolled to the brink of the pit and over it, as it shrank to a little round hole unnoticed

beneath our threshing bodies!

* * * * *

At the side of the circular valley Alan and Dr. Kent crouched with the smaller figure of Babs between them. They saw Polter and me as two swaying gigantic forms locked in a death struggle, towering against the sky. Tremendous expanded bodies! They saw us come to grips; saw the great hunched Polter bend me backward, choking me.

Our bodies lurched. Our huge legs with a single step brought us to the center of the valley. It was a shrinking valley to Alan, Babs and Dr. Kent, for they too, were enlarging. But the fighting giant figures were growing faster. In only a moment their shoulders were up there in the sky, pressing against the narrowing cliff walls.

Alan gasped, "But George will be crushed! Look at him!"

Horror swept them as they crouched, watching. The enormous pillars of Polter's legs towered straight up from near at hand. Alan was aware of himself screaming:

"George, get out! You're too large! Too large for in here!"

As though his microscopic voice could reach me—my head a hundred feet above him. But he screamed it again. This was all in a few horrible moments, though it seemed to the three watchers an eternity. Alan was helpless to aid me; they had taken all of the enlarging drug they had.

Then they saw Polter cast me off. I lurched and struck, with my shoulders wedged against the cliff directly over where they crouched. The overhead sky was darkened as Polter scrambled upward.

Alan was still screaming futilely.

Babs huddled with white horrified face, staring. Then I went out after Polter. My disappearing legs were great dark blurs in the sky. Alan saw the valley now contracted to a thousand feet of width, with its cliffs equally as high. Then everything was smaller.... The sky overhead went dark again from cliff to cliff as a segment of rolling bodies momentarily spanned the opening.

Presently Alan realized that the valley had narrowed to a pit. He stood up. "Hurry! Now we can go after them. Up there!"

The opening above was empty. Polter and I were fighting some distance away....

Dr. Kent was soon large enough to scramble out of the pit. Alan handed the little Babs up to him and followed. Alan saw that they were now in a long gully, blind at one end with a five hundred foot perpendicular cliff. Against the wall, the Titanic form of Polter stood at bay. And I was confronting him. The summit of the cliff was lower than our waists. Triumph swept Alan; he saw that I was the larger!

As Polter bored into me my backward step crossed the full width of the gully. Alan shouted:

"Down! Babs—Father!"

They had barely time to flatten themselves in a narrow crevice between upstanding rocks before my foot crashed down. For an instant the sole of my foot formed a flat black ceiling as it spanned the rocks. Then it lifted and was gone with a blurred swoop. They saw the white blur of my hand come down and snatch a tremendous boulder, raising it with a great sweep of movement into the sky. They saw me crash it against Polter; but it only struck his shoulder. He roared with anger. The whole sky was roaring and rumbling with our shouts and our panting breathing, and the ground was clattering, pounding with our giant tread. Huge loose boulders were tumbled in an avalanche everywhere.

Again it seemed to Alan that our lurching, heedlessly surging bodies must be crushed within these contracting walls. Only our locked, intertwined legs were visible; our bodies were lost in the sky. Then it seemed to Alan that I had heaved Polter upward. And followed him. We disappeared. There was a distant overhead rumble, and the murky sky, with vague patches of far-distant illumination in it, became empty of movement....

The walls presently were again closing upon Alan and his companions. They ran out of the open end of the shrinking little gully and came to a new upward vista....

* * * * *

I found myself a full head and shoulders taller than Polter. And he was tiring, panting heavily. His face was cut and bleeding from the blows of my fist. The rock I heaved struck his shoulder. He roared, head down, and bored into me. He was heavier than I. His weight flung me back. My foot slid on the loose stones of the gully floor. I did not know that Babs, Alan and their father were huddled under those stones!

My back struck the opposite wall. Polter's upflung knee caught me in the stomach, all but knocking the breath out of me. He was desperate, oblivious to the closing walls. And as he flung his arms with a grip about my neck, hanging, trying to bear down, I saw in his blazing dark eyes what seemed the light of suicide. I think that then, with a sudden frenzied madness he realized that he was beaten, and tried to pull us to the ground and let the walls crush us.

I summoned all my remaining strength and heaved us forward. I broke his hold. His body was jammed back against a lowering wall. Its top seemed almost at our knees. I shoved frantically. He fell backward and I jumped after him.

We were on a great rocky plateau. But it was shrinking, crawling into itself. Spots of light were in the murk overhead: there seemed a distant circular horizon of emptiness around us.

Polter was lying in a heap. But it was trickery, for as I incautiously bent over him his hand crashed a rock against my head. I reeled, with all the world turning black, but didn't fall. There was a terrible instant when my senses were going, but I fought to hold them. Blood from a wound on my forehead was streaming in my eyes. I was staggering. Then I realized that I was grimly tossing my head, shaking the blood away; and little by little my sight came back.

Polter was on his feet, rushing me. His fist came with an upward swing at my chin, but I ducked.

And suddenly, fighting up there in the open, my mind envisioned how gigantic we were! This was a great upland plateau, rounded with miles of distance and shadowy dimly radiant abyss beyond its circular horizon. And I was a thousand feet or more tall! A Titan, looming here in the sky!

My fist quite unexpectedly caught Polter's jaw. His simultaneous swing went wild, as I leapt backward from it. He staggered, and his arms dropped to his sides. I was crouched forward, guarded, watching him while I gasped for breath. There was the briefest of instant when an expression of vague surprise swept his face. But I had not knocked him out.

It was death overtaking him. His heart was yielding, overtaxed from the strain; and I think that there, at the last, he realized it. The blood drained suddenly from his face and lips, leaving them livid. I saw fear, then a wild horror in his eyes. He stood swaying. Then his knees gave way and he toppled. He fell from his height in the air where I stood gazing at him—fell forward on his face, his Titanic length spread all across the top of this rocky landscape!

For a moment I did not move. My head was reeling, my ears roaring. Blood streamed into my eyes. I wiped it away with a torn sleeve and stood panting, gazing at the glowing distance around me.

I was a Titan, standing there. The body of Polter was shrinking at my feet. The circular abyss of emptiness came nearer as this rocky eminence contracted.

Suddenly my attention went to the sky overhead. Vague distant lights were there. Then a broad flat blur seemed spread over me. Light everywhere was growing. Beyond the nearby brink of the abyss was a white reflected radiance from beneath. Abruptly I realized there was a level, flat white plain running far off there in the distance.

Overhead a radiance contracted into a spot of light. A shape in the sky moved! I heard a faraway rumble—a human voice!

The body of Polter lay at my feet. It was hardly the length of my forearm. I stood, a Titan.

And then, with a shock of realization, I saw how tiny I was! This was the broken top of that fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut! I was standing there, under the lens of the giant microscope in Polter's dome-room laboratory,

with half a dozen astounded Quebec police officials peering down at me!

CHAPTER XII

I need not detail the aftermath of our emergence from the atom. Dr. Kent and Babs followed me out within a few moments. But Alan was not with them! He had seen Polter fall. His father and Babs were safe. The sacrifice he had made in leaving Glora was no longer needed.

Down there on the rocky plateau, Dr. Kent suddenly realized that Alan was dwindling.

"Father, I have to! Don't you understand? Glora's world is menaced. I can't leave her like this. My duty to you and Babs is ended. I did my best. You two are safe now."

"Alan! You can't go!"

He was already down at Dr. Kent's waist, Babs' size. He held up his hand. "Dad, don't try to stop me. Good-bye." His rugged youthful face was flushed, his voice choked. "You—you've been a mighty good father to me. Always."

Babs flung her arms about him. "Alan. Don't!"

"But I must." He smiled whimsically as he kissed her. "You wouldn't want to leave George, would you? Never see him again? I'm not asking you to do that, am I?"

"But, Alan—"

"You've been a great little pal, Babs. But I have to go."

"Alan! You talk as though you were never coming back!"

"Do I? But of course I'm coming back!" He cast her off. "Babs, listen. Father's upset. That's natural. You tell him not to worry. I'll be careful, and do what I can to save that little city. I must find Glora and—"

Babs was suddenly trembling with eagerness for him. "Yes! Of course you must, Alan!"

"I'll find her and bring her out here! I'll do it! Don't you worry." He was dwindling fast. Dr. Kent had collapsed to a rock, staring down with horror-stricken eyes. Alan called up to Babs:

"Listen! Have George watch the chunk of gold quartz. Have it guarded and watched day and night. Handle it carefully, Babs!"

"Yes! Yes! How long will you be gone, Alan?"

"How do I know? But I'll come back—don't worry. Maybe in only a day or two of your time."

"Right! Good-bye, Alan!"

"Good-bye," his tiny voice echoed up.

Babs could see his miniature face smiling up at her. She smiled back and waved her arm as he vanished into the pebbles at her feet.

* * * * *

It has broken Dr. Kent. A month now has passed. He seldom mentions Alan to Babs and me. But when he does, he tries to smile and say that Alan soon will return. He has been very ill this last week, though he is better now. He did not tell us that he was working to compound another supply of the drugs, but we knew it very well.

And his emotion, the strain of it, made him break. He was in bed a week. We are living in New York, quite near the Museum of the American Society for Scientific Research. In a room of the biological department there, the precious fragment of golden quartz lies guarded. A microscope is over it, and there is never a moment of the day or night without an alert, keen-eyed watcher peering down.

But nothing has appeared. Neither friend or foe—nothing. I cannot say so to Babs, but often I fear that Dr. Kent will suddenly die, and the secret of his drugs die with him. I hinted that I would make a trip into the atom if he would let me, but it excited him so greatly I had to laugh it off with the assurance that of course Alan would soon return safely to us. Dr. Kent is an old man now, unnaturally old, with, it seems, the full weight of eighty years pressing upon him. He cannot stand this emotion. I think he is despairingly summoning strength to work upon his drugs, fearful that at any moment, he will not be equal to it. Yet more fearful to disclose the secret and unloose such a diabolic power.

There are nights when with Dr. Kent asleep, Babs and I slip away and go to the Museum. We dismiss the guard for a time, and in that private room we sit by the microscope to watch. The fragment of golden quartz lies on its clean white slab with a brilliant light upon it.

Mysterious little golden rock! What secrets are there, down beyond the vanishing point in the realm of the infinitely small? Our human longings go to Alan and Glora.

But sometimes we are swept by the greater viewpoint. Awed by the mysteries of nature, we realize how very small and unimportant we are in the vast scheme of things. We envisage the infinite reaches of astronomical space overhead. Realms of largeness unfathomable. And at our feet, everywhere, a myriad entrances into the infinitely small. With ourselves in between—with our fatuous human consciousness that we are of some importance to it all!

Truly there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy!